

# The New Education Market

*Examining the early responses of public schools to competition*

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush asked Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge to devote his energy to finding ways to strengthen the country's domestic security. Before the tragedy, Ridge had worked equally hard at introducing competition into Pennsylvania's education system. On the last page of this issue, Ridge explains why.

How will competition affect traditional public schools? Will they increase their productivity? Slide into passivity and bankruptcy? Turn into charity schools for the very poor and downcast? Shed responsibility for teaching challenging children? Or muddle along as usual?

No one can be certain, theorists have said, until a full-scale competitive system is tried in a serious fashion, on a large scale, over a lengthy period. This might be done as a huge experiment or simply as a forthright policy change. Cities might provide fully funded vouchers to everyone, for example. Or states might allow an unlimited number of charter schools to open, with enough funds to cover both operations and capital costs. This would facilitate the establishment of both individualized charter schools and multiple private companies with powerful education brand names.

So we won't know for sure until we try competition on a large scale. In the meantime, however, should we not at least listen to the first whispers of information emanating from experiments currently under way? Undoubtedly the hints they provide will be subtle and ambiguous. Much as weak signals from the outer realms of the universe are both hard to detect and even more difficult to interpret, so, too, preliminary findings about the ways in which new forms of school choice will shape the public schools are hardly definitive. Yet few scientists would ignore well-researched results.

So it is that we bring together in this issue the best of the new evidence on how choice may be affecting public schools as well as a robust, informed conversation about its longer-term potential. The carefully conducted research by Caroline Hoxby and Jay Greene tells us that choice—even the threat of choice—provokes a detectable response from the public schools. Test

scores rose when public schools were placed in more competitive contexts in Milwaukee, Michigan, Arizona, and Florida.

What policy changes actually produced these test-score gains? The participants in our forum take a close look at the competitive environments in Milwaukee, Michigan, and Arizona and find tangible changes hard to come by.

The most visible response to competition has been aggressive advertising campaigns. Perhaps more important changes are occurring at the grassroots. But turning a disheveled mountain of public education into a national schoolhouse on a hill will be a job as daunting as the marvelous, half-century-long, but ongoing rendering of a statue of Crazy Horse, the great Native American warrior, out of a Black Hills mountain by the Korzcak family.

The topic is a large one, and we invite you to tell us about any signs, positive or negative, that you have detected. Send your letters to *Education Next*, 226 Littauer North Yard, 1875 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, or email to Editor\_EM@latte.harvard.edu.

We hope you will also enjoy the remainder of this issue. Home schooling has received a lot of press recently; Christopher Hammons places much of the hysteria in the public media in thoughtful perspective. John Bishop makes the case for requiring high schoolers to pass curriculum-based exams in order to graduate, pointing out that students learn more and schools become more focused whenever these exit exams are in place. Maris Vinovskis calls attention to the misuse of the federal research dollar in education and the need for a basic restructuring of the federal research enterprise. And our forum on urban schools reveals that much of the governmental gyrating that is termed reform simply replaces one batch of ineffective institutions with another. If choice has yet to provide the definitive word on school reform, the governmental rearrangements conventionally attempted hardly seem more attractive.

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-THE EDITORS

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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