TRADITIONAL AND PROGRESSIVE SCHOOLS: IDENTIFYING TWO MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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Two broad approaches to contemporary education have evolved in recent decades: the traditional and the progressive. The purpose of this study was to survey public, Catholic, and independent elementary schools across the state of Ohio with the aim of finding out: (1) the extent to which various educational practices associated with those two approaches have reportedly been adopted in the schools; and, (2) if the types of schools differ along a continuum of traditional to progressive educational practices. It was found that most schools report a balanced mix of practices, with Ohio's elementary schools ranging along the traditional to progressive continuum in the following order: independent nonchartered, independent chartered, public, and Catholic. All schools tend to be more traditional in the approach they adopt to reading and to assessment. Assessment is influenced by state mandates regarding proficiency testing in selected grades. A better understanding of the practices reported to be in place in today's schools will help inform the current debate on school reform and focus the discussion of choice by providing a framework with clear alternatives.

American schools today are facing a crisis of confidence as they find themselves embroiled in a struggle between two competing philosophies of education. In the last several decades, progressivist ideas have come to assume an increasingly dominant place in the landscape of American education (Ravitch, 1985). This approach has brought with it a number of practices that have generated controversy and weakened the consensus necessary for a society to maintain effective schools.

Modern progressive education, as practiced in today's schools, finds its philosophical roots in the ideas of Rousseau. Herbert Spencer, and most espe-

cially John Dewey. Their ideas shaped what came to be regarded as liberal education in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But while progressivist ideas gained some ground throughout the 20th century in America, their influence was largely circumscribed until the movement was given new life in the 1960s and 70s by a group of writers who advocated a radical transformation of America's schools. A generation of educational critics including Charles Silberman, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, John Holt, and A. S. Neill argued for a "new education," one based on progressivist principles heavily imbued with ideas borrowed from humanistic psychology. The title of Lyon's 1971 book, *Learning to Feel, Feeling to Learn*, reflected the emerging philosophy that was to become a major force in shaping American education during the 1970s and 80s.

More recently, progressivist education has also been revitalized by the introduction of constructionist models of learning which emphasize the active role of the learner in building understanding and making sense of information while calling for the social construction of knowledge. The constructionist view of the teacher as one who guides discovery is consistent with established progressive tenets of discovery learning. For example, constructionists hold that rather than teaching basic skills of mathematical computation it is preferable to begin with presenting the problem, and then let the students figure out how to perform the operations.

As progressivist ideas gained influence, they became arrayed against a set of practices associated with a more traditional approach to schooling in America. Hamm (1989), in a lucid treatment of educational concepts, points out that, fairly or unfairly, a cluster of notions is attached to these two broad approaches. Traditional education has become associated with concepts such as subject-centered, teaching, standards, examinations, structure, order, work discipline, memorization, mastery of subject content, order, and accountability. Notions that have attached themselves to progressive education include child-centered, emotions, activity, relevance, discovery, critical thinking, growth, and creativity.

Much of the controversy in and around today's schools, as well as the resulting calls for school reform, emerge from the clash of these two competing approaches to education. Indeed, even within and among private schools, there is considerable debate regarding the direction of educational reforms. This study adds to an already lively debate among educators and asks which schools best apply various philosophies of education.

TWO MODELS OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Educators, politicians, and the general public show burgeoning interest in finding alternative ways to provide schooling. This interest is manifested by a widening array of options such as school choice, vouchers, and charter

schools, many of which are structured to compete with the monopoly of public education. Individual schools, both public and non-public, have also responded to the winds of change by exploring and adopting various innovations in the delivery of education.

In some cases, educators consciously adopt practices derived from educational theories or philosophies of education to help to shape their school's identity, to better articulate their mission, and to implement the educational theory they wish to embrace. Sometimes these decisions are influenced by a defining ideology. Yet while it may be true that a broader ideology undoubtedly affects the choices that are made about education, it is equally likely that educational practices will be adopted by informal, eclectic, and trial-and-error means (Raywid, 1983). But no matter how they are adopted, models of educational practice are important as they influence the structures, organization, and management of schools—key issues in matching the needs of children with the schools designed to meet those needs (Chandler, 1997; 1998).

Makedon (1992) has proposed a useful typology of school reform models. Recognizing the historical roots of school reform, he has set forth a typology of models based on the underlying ideology. Within the traditional mainstream, he proposes that models may be characterized as conservative or liberal. Models outside of the mainstream, such as experimental and alternate school arrangements, he calls radical models.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate models adopted within mainstream schools, the broad bipolar typology suggested by Makedon seems most useful. Unfortunately, Makedon's ideological labels hold political connotations which can blur the educational dimensions of the question. It would appear to be equally valid, and in some ways more appropriate, to label the two models in educational terms as traditional and progressive, a bipolar typology that has been adopted for this study. Broadly speaking, educational practices in today's schools may be seen as clustering into two identifiable groups, depending on the approach they take to various dimensions of schooling such as organization, management, curriculum, and instruction. The characteristics of each model are described below.

TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS

Traditional schools emphasize academic standards that tend to be more authoritarian, following a curriculum that is content-based and formed around the core disciplines. Such schools are inclined to emphasize structure and discipline and typically rely on grading, tracking, and grouping students by ability level for instruction by the teacher. They tend to employ objective tests for evaluating student achievement.

Critics of traditional approaches maintain that such schools impair children's development by imposing a rigid learning sequence which ignores

individual differences in the ways children learn. Moreover, these schools unfairly hold students to standards that are not consistent with their learning styles. The focus on academics is seen as too narrow, emphasizing academic achievement, and ignoring other aspects of the developing child, such as emotional adjustment. Traditional schools are also criticized for relying too much on direct instruction and rote memorization and, with their teacher-oriented authoritarian instruction, tending to stifle children's natural sense of exploration and creativity.

PROGRESSIVE SCHOOLS

Progressive educators believe in a child-centered approach, one that is more democratic, with the emphasis on group projects rather than individual performance for grades. They speak of a humanistic concern for the whole child—hence their concern with social and emotional development and the emerging sense of self-esteem. They advocate experiential, discovery learning which is led by the child, as opposed to direct instruction led by the teacher; cooperative and collaborative activities, as opposed to the competition inherent in grades and tests; and a concern with using differences in individual learning styles to determine the process and content of learning. They are concerned with developing processes such as higher-order thinking and critical thinking and are less concerned with the transmission of factual knowledge.

Critics of progressive approaches believe that such schools, by de-emphasizing academic work and emphasizing process over content, weaken the academic foundation necessary for a lifetime of learning. They feel the emphasis on self-esteem and children's emotional development is misplaced, often resulting in rewarding style over substance, and see the child-oriented approach, with the teacher being relegated to a less central role, as detrimental to adult authority and discipline.

A comparison of traditional and progressive schools appears in Table 1.

Table 1
A Comparison of Two Educational Models

Traditional Schools	Progressive Schools
Instruction. Direct instruction by the teacher; homogeneous grouping.	*Instruction.* Self-directed learning, discovery learning, working cooperatively with others; heterogeneous grouping.
Reading. Reliance on a phonics approach.	*Reading.* Reliance on a whole-language approach.
Mathematics. Reliance on direct instruction; drill, computation skills.	*Mathematics.* Reliance on discovery and student-initiated learning.

Assessment. Reliance on periodic testing with norm-referenced, objective tests.

Grades are assigned by comparing performance with age/grade peers.

Social studies focus on the American heritage and on cross-cultural studies.

Outcomes. Emphasize academic skills as demonstrated in the traditional core areas.

Curriculum. Narrow, focused on academic areas.

Standards are set so that all children seek the same level of minimal competency.

Teacher's role. Academic instructor, authority figure.

Assessment. Reliance on portfolios which feature individual and collaborative projects.

Grades are downplayed in favor of teacher narratives on progress.

Social studies focus on diversity, multiculturalism, social concerns, and social responsibilities.

Outcomes. Emphasize the whole-child approach; psychological, social, and cultural aspects of child development.

Curriculum. Encompasses a range of issues; a balance between academic and social concerns.

Standards are adjusted recognizing the differences among individual learners.

Teacher's role. Facilitator, counselor, mentor.

From: Chandler, L. A. (1998). Two Models of Educational Practice.

THE SCHOOL PRACTICES PROJECT

School choice is based on the premise that schools may provide clear alternatives to what many see as the dominant educational pattern in American schools today. Still, the notion that there are significant differences among today's schools has not been established. Moreover, if there is a dominant pattern that defines mainstream American schools, that pattern is not clearly understood nor generally agreed upon, leaving alternatives sometimes more apparent than real. This can cause confusion for educators, parents, and the general public. Therefore, clearly defining the extant models of educational practice and determining the prevalence of their implementation is important.

The purpose of this research project is to determine the extent to which the educational practices associated with two models of education have been adopted, in whole or in part, in today's schools. From the data will emerge a descriptive picture of current practices. This "anatomy of the schools" will allow for comparisons to be made among various types of mainstream American schools to help determine whether the purported differences among various types of schools are significant and, if so, in what ways.

A pilot study (Chandler, 1998) was conducted to test the feasibility and acceptance of the questionnaire. For this study 27 schools in the greater

Pittsburgh area were surveyed. In general, the questionnaire was well received and proved to be feasible, with a return rate of 63%.

A subsequent study (Guidry, 1998) was conducted of public (n=56) and Catholic (n=59) schools in southwestern Pennsylvania to see if the types of schools differed on a continuum from traditional to progressive educational practices. In general, the two types of schools were more alike than different, with specific differences on only 2 of the 10 practices: the style of instruction and the outcomes expected in terms of child development.

This next phase of the project involved surveying primary and elementary schools across the state of Ohio. The intent was to survey public, Catholic, independent chartered, and independent nonchartered schools, using the Survey of School Practices. (In Ohio, chartered schools are so designated by approval of the Ohio Department of Education.) The purpose is to learn the extent to which various educational practices have reportedly been adopted in the schools and if the types of schools differ on the continuum from traditional to progressive educational practices. The survey appears in the Appendix.

METHOD

Survey instrument

A review of current educational literature from the ERIC database (1992-1998) and of selected topics from the *Education Week* database identified current educational practices in today's schools. From these reviews, a list of 10 practices was identified, and each was placed on a five-point traditional-to-progressive continuum.

This list was subsequently refined by a scholarly panel which included a professor and educational historian, a teacher of over 20 years' experience, a teacher and administrator with over 30 years' educational experience, a professor of educational psychology and writer on educational matters, a professor of education and research methodology, and an educational policy maker with considerable experience at the state and national levels. Panel members in general agreed with the proposed characterization of educational practices, and their comments were incorporated into the table (Table 1) which was derived from that list.

Next, in order to gather data on the extent of the adoption of educational practices associated with the two models, a questionnaire was constructed based on the elements outlined in Table 1. The resulting School Practices Survey is composed of 10 educational practices relating to instruction, reading, math, social studies, curriculum, outcomes, assessment, grades, standards, and the teacher's role. These practices are arranged as questionnaire items on a bipolar dimensional scale (from traditional to progressive) that represents the degree of adoption of each practice by a school.

The School Practices Survey yields 10 item scores and a total score, which may be seen as an estimate of the place of the school along the traditional-progressive continuum. Possible total scores range from 10 (most traditional) to 50 (most progressive), with the midpoint at 30.

Respondents

To provide a representative sample of Ohio's schools, data were collected from the Ohio Department of Education listing of 1,687 elementary schools distributed as follows: 835 public schools, 448 Catholic schools, 185 chartered independent schools, 219 nonchartered independent schools.

From these lists, 600 schools were randomly selected to be surveyed: 200 public schools, 200 Catholic schools, 100 chartered independent schools, 100 nonchartered independent schools.

Procedure

The procedure involved mailing to heads of schools, principals, or school directors a letter asking that they complete a survey form designed to characterize their school in terms of 10 educational practices. Two previous studies (Chandler, 1998; Guidry, 1998) which used the same questionnaire and a similar survey procedure with elementary schools yielded return rates of 63% and 61%, respectively.

Following the same procedures as tested in the previous studies, 600 surveys were sent out; 227 were returned within two weeks. Follow-up reminders yielded an additional 118, for a sample of 345 (58%).

Of the 345, 9 were invalidated for various reasons, leaving a final sample of 336 schools with a distribution as follows: 124 public, 133 Catholic, 57 independent chartered, and 22 independent nonchartered schools.

RESULTS

To examine the extent of various educational practices adopted by the 336 elementary schools surveyed in this study, item responses on the School Practices Survey were placed on a scale of 1 to 5, with 3 as the midpoint. Means and standard deviations were then calculated for the 10 item scores as well as the total score (Table 2).

Table 2
Responses to the School Practices Survey for Four Types of Schools

|	Public (n=124)		Catholic (n=133)		Ind/chrt (n=57)		Ind/nch (n=22)		Total (n=336)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Instruction	3.00	.89	3.08	.37	3.45	.57	3.45	.22	2.96	1.04
Reading	2.81	.85	2.18	1.02	1.96	1.01	1.31	.64	2.32	1.03
Mathematics	3.21	.88	3.04	.89	2.71	.90	2.36	1.09	3.00	.93
Social Studies	2.64	.84	2.90	1.10	2.49	1.10	2.09	1.10	2.68	.98
Curriculum	2.66	.90	3.25	1.02	2.64	1.06	2.22	1.34	2.86	1.06
Outcomes	2.55	.94	3.10	1.03	2.63	1.24	2.09	1.10	2.75	1.09
Assessment	2.29	.89	2.35	.85	2.15	1.25	1.77	1.10	2.26	.97
Grades	2.41	.88	2.39	.94	2.47	1.37	2.27	1.20	2.41	1.02
Standards	2.51	1.05	3.33	1.09	2.59	1.19	2.86	1.67	2.87	1.19
Teacher's Role	2.41	.88	2.39	.94	2.47	1.37	2.27	1.20	2.87	10.6
Total	2.69	.69	2.87	.61	2.45	.92	2.30	.92	2.69	.69

Examination of Table 2 shows that the schools on average see themselves as having developed a balanced approach, one that favors neither extreme on the traditional-to-progressive continuum but tends toward the middle. The group total means fell from the more traditional to the more progressive in the following order: independent nonchartered, independent chartered, public, Catholic. A cross-tabulation was constructed to illustrate the distribution of scores on the five-point School Practices Survey (Table 3).

Table 3
Frequency of Item Responses of Four Types of Schools on the School Practices Survey

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Catholic	131	361	469	284	85	1330
	.10	.27	.35	.22	.06	
Public	114	436	426	245	19	1240
	.09	.35	.34	.20	.02	
Ind./chrt.	122	218	120	70	40	570
	.21	.38	.21	.12	.07	
Ind./nchrt.	90	40	43	27	20	220
	.41	.18	.20	.12	.09	
Total	457	1055	1058	626	164	3360

To better understand the pattern of scores, the practices of the four types of schools were profiled (Figure 1). An examination of the profiles shows a tendency for all types of schools to adopt relatively similar positions, although some (e.g., independent schools) are consistently more traditional, while the Catholic schools seem consistently more progressive. A closer examination of the profiles shows that, in general, all schools tend to be more traditional in two practice areas: reading and assessment.

Figure 1
School Practices Profiles for Four Types of Schools

........................Public   _ . _ . _ . _ Catholic   _____ Ind./chrt.   _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ Ind./nchrt.
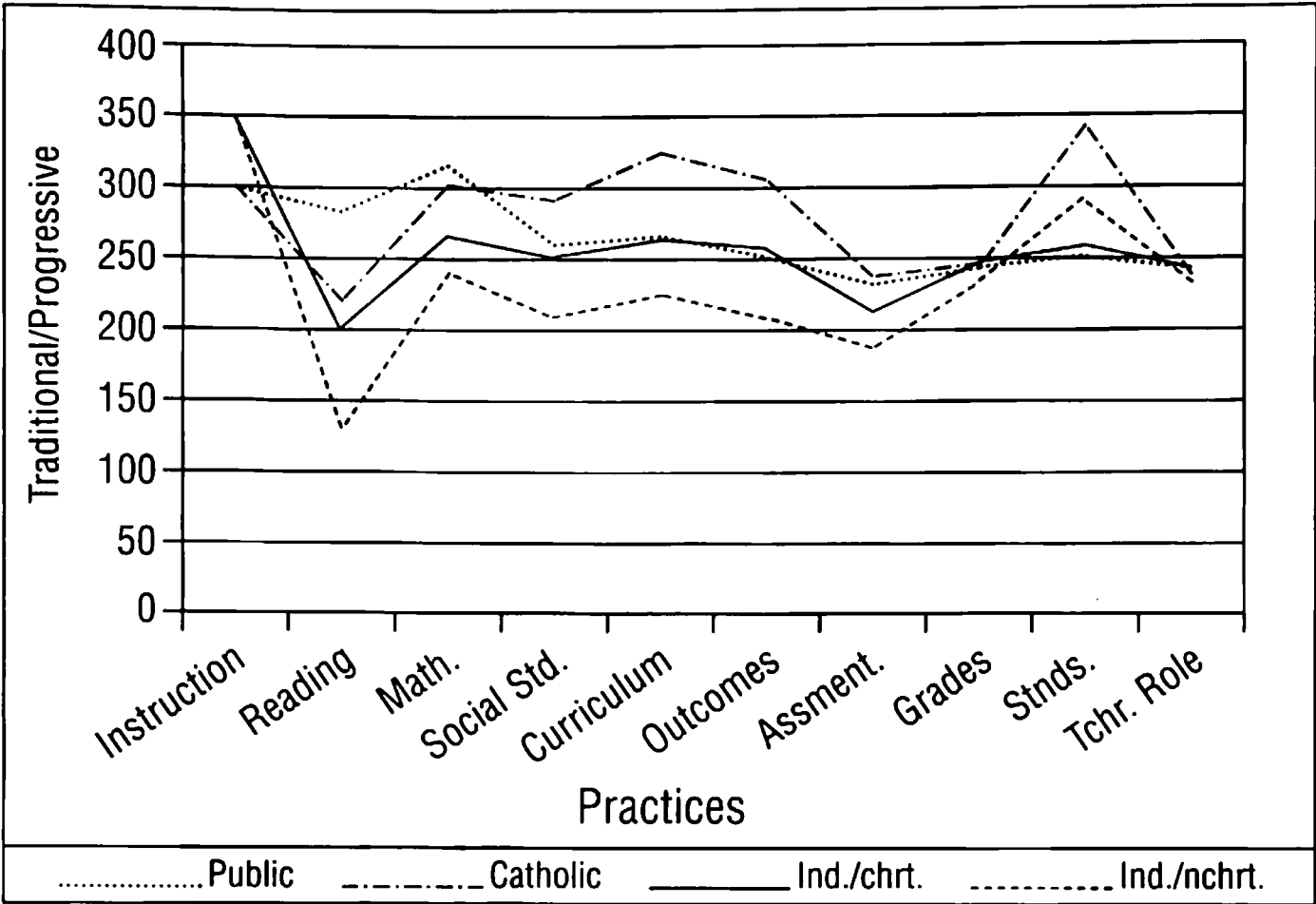
As a measure of consistency of response, intercorrelation matrices were constructed for all groups to examine the relationships among the 10 practices within each type of school. The results showed that on average there was more consistency among practices in the independent groups (r=.80 for chartered; r=.73 for nonchartered) than in the other two groups (r=.57 for public schools; r=.62 for Catholic schools).

Next, in order to discover if there were statistical differences among the types of schools, an analysis of variance was performed (Table 4).

Table 4
Analysis of Variance for Total Scores on the School Practices Survey Among Four Types of Schools

Source	DF	Mean Squares	F Ratio
Between groups	3	3.6370	7.9998*
Within groups	332	.4546	
Total	335		

*p<.05

This analysis found there were significant differences among the mean total scores of the four types of schools. A Sheffe post hoc comparison indicated that the Catholic schools showed a significantly higher (e.g., more pro-

gressive) score than either of the two independent schools groups.

Finally, as a measure of reliability, a test-retest procedure was conducted with a sample of 30 schools (10 each from the public, Catholic, and independent groups). A second survey form was sent after an interval of two weeks, and 27 schools responded. The mean time between administrations was 23.4 days. The results showed good test-retest reliability (r=.87). As another measure of reliability, a coefficient alpha was calculated to estimate internal consistency. The results found the School Practices Survey to have reasonably good internal consistency (alpha=.86).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to determine the extent of adoption of various educational practices in Ohio's elementary schools. It was found that, while schools show a similar pattern of practices, most often a mix of traditional and progressive approaches, Catholic and public schools tend to be more progressive, while independent schools tend to be more traditional. Moreover, Catholic and public schools seem more eclectic in the practices they adopt, while the independent schools seem to be more consistent across all 10 practices. These results, in part, support previous findings from a study conducted in Pennsylvania (Guidry, 1998) which showed few differences between that state's public and Catholic schools on these 10 practices.

School practices profiles constructed for each type of school show that in two areas (reading and assessment) schools tend to be more traditional. Traditional methods in reading are often associated with primary reliance on a phonics approach for instruction in the early grades. This may speak to the point that reading is something of a "lightning rod" in the school reform debate, with many parents demanding programs with a traditional phonics component. The popularity of the commercial phonics programs for home use reflects the same desire. Likewise, a more traditional approach to assessment (e.g., relying on objective, standardized tests) may be seen as a response to the concern of school reformers regarding student learning and the increased accountability of schools, as reflected in more rigorous state standards.

This current interest of the public and of state governments in standards also may have influenced the standards item on the survey form, since many respondents who commented on the survey pointed out that the state of Ohio requires proficiency tests at grades 4, 6, 9, and 12, thereby setting a level of minimal competency and mandating a more traditional approach. These state standards may also influence, to a lesser extent, assessment, grades, and outcomes.

This issue was mentioned by 11 out of the 31 respondents who chose to write additional comments on the form. Most simply commented on the state

mandates, but some were more negative. For example, one respondent (#1131) complained that "The philosophy of educating for multiple intelligence is not ever acknowledged in how we assess student progress in the state of Ohio."

Echoing similar sentiments, another respondent (#1059) commented that "Proficiency testing is truly the tail wagging the dog" and another respondent commented that "We are working toward changing our assessment methods to more of a narrative."

While the words *traditional* and *progressive* were purposely avoided in the cover letter and on the survey form, nevertheless some respondents discerned the underlying dimensional framework. It may be that in some cases, participants felt the word *progressive* had a more positive connotation; some seemed to be rather apologetic for subscribing to a more traditional approach to education. For example, one respondent (#2065) reported that "We are slowly moving towards less directive education. This survey helped me see again how slowly!" and (#2127): "I would like to have reported all responses in the right-hand column. We are working continuously on this."

Such sentiments are consistent with many of the responses to our previous study of Pennsylvania's schools (Guidry, 1998), in which one respondent (#130) described the situation this way: "By completing this form I realized after looking over my answers that this school is still in the traditional style of teaching. We are slowly trying to modernize our style."

However, not all opinion favored the progressive approach. One respondent (#4056) said, "The descriptions on the right-hand side of this form (i. e., progressive), to a large extent, describe why our country is so misdirected today. Just reading them caused the hairs on my neck to bristle. They are spineless teaching concepts which are the spawn of the 1960s. I know; I was there."

Finally, a few respondents argued for a balanced approach, one of whom (#2181) took the time to explain in some detail a teaching philosophy, which in part, maintained that "...the more skill and ease one attains with what we consider 'the basics' the more apt the teacher is to use the less traditional styles of teaching, allowing a student to use his or her skills as a springboard to deeper thinking and creativity."

In conclusion, it appears today's schools (especially public and Catholic schools) lack philosophical consistency, adopting a rather eclectic mix of traditional and progressive practices. Sometimes these mixed approaches cause confusion, and they seem to produce schools designed by committees, with something for everyone but satisfying no one.

What's happening in the schools reflects the wider gulf between the overwhelming majority of parents and the educational establishment. National polls consistently find parents favoring a more traditional "back-to-basics" education for their children. Professional educators, on the other

hand, seem committed in varying degrees to the dominant progressive philosophy. They represent what Hirsch (1996) has termed an "impregnable fortress"—an interlocking directorate of schools, teachers' colleges, and state departments of education, along with teachers' unions and philanthropic foundations, all of which subscribe to educational orthodoxy.

Given this context, genuine options for parents remain very limited; and many schools offered as alternatives are found to be more apparent than real in those essential practices which define mainstream American education today.

Of course these results must be interpreted with some caution, considering the limitations inherent in such survey research. First, it should be kept in mind that these data represent opinions about the practices in the schools and do not necessarily reflect the actual practices. On the other hand, those opinions deserve a certain validity since they are those of the principal, an educational leader who is increasingly seen as having a key role in determining the quality and type of education being delivered in today's schools.

Second, a well-known response tendency toward the mean is often found in survey research, and this tendency probably had some effect on these data. Educators tend, as most people do, not to wish to be seen as extreme in their view or behavior, for the most part preferring the middle ground.

In the context of school reform, issues of school choice have become widely and publicly debated. A better understanding of the practices reported to be in place in today's schools will help to inform that debate and focus the discussion of choice by providing a framework with clear alternatives. It is hoped that this study will contribute toward that end.

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APPENDIX
SCHOOL PRACTICES SURVEY

Below are 10 educational practices arranged as dimensions. While we recognize that both elements are likely to be found to some extent, we are asking you to choose a circle showing which side *tends to be emphasized more in your school.* Thank you.

Direct instruction by the teacher; class-wide.	O O O O O	Self-directed instruction by small groups; cooperative learning.
Reading relies on a phonics approach; word attack skills.	O O O O O	Reading relies on a whole-language approach.
Math relies on teacher-led instruction.	O O O O O	Math relies on student-initiated discovery learning.
Social studies focuses on history; cross-cultural studies.	O O O O O	Social studies focuses on ethnicity and multicultural issues.
Curriculum focuses on academic areas.	O O O O O	Curriculum includes social and emotional development.
Goal is to emphasize academic skills in traditional core areas.	O O O O O	Goal is to emphasize the whole child; psychosocial and academic development.
Assessment is by periodic testing, with norm-referenced, objective tests.	O O O O O	Assessment is by portfolios and collaborative projects.
Grades are assigned by comparing performance with age/grade peers.	O O O O O	Grades are downplayed in favor of teacher comments on progress.
Standards call for all children to achieve at a minimal level of competency.	O O O O O	Standards are adapted to take into account differences.
Teacher's role is as academic instructor; authority figure.	O O O O O	Teacher's role is as facilitator; counselor; mentor.