

7. THE LAST MONOPOLY

WHEN GEORGE and Prilla Brackett moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, they enrolled their eldest son, Ethan, in the fourth grade at the Tobin Elementary School. It was a logical choice. The school was located only a block and a half from the Bracketts' three-story brown frame house on Lakeview Avenue in West Cambridge. It had a strong open-classroom program, which seemed to appeal to Ethan. Like the neighborhood itself, Tobin was racially and culturally mixed.

Ethan, a tall, thin boy who did gymnastics and played the piano in his spare time, did well at Tobin. But two years later, when Ethan was in the sixth grade, the school announced that its highly popular seventh-grade science teacher was leaving. Moreover, the upper two grades at Tobin, which runs kindergarten through eighth, were much more structured than the more open environment in which he had so far done so well. "It didn't look good to Ethan," recalled George Brackett, a heavily mustached man who operates a small computer software company out of their home. "We began looking at other programs."

The Bracketts sat in on classes at the Longfellow School, about a mile and a half from their house, but decided that the Intensive Studies Program there that had intrigued them was "much more regimented" than what they had in mind for Ethan. Then they visited the King School in Cambridgeport, which offers several different programs, including a minischool—King Open—in which seventh-graders study algebra. "That wasn't available anywhere else," said Brackett. That fall Ethan transferred to King Open. Later, when it came time for their younger son, Matthew, to be in school, he, too, started at Tobin, and they subsequently decided to keep him there.

The Bracketts were able to exercise these options with their different children because Cambridge is one of a growing number of communities across the country that has challenged the monopoly that public schools have traditionally exercised in determining where students will go to school. In the past the Bracketts would probably have enrolled all of their children in the same school, and they would have had no options to make changes. In all likelihood the school would have been their local "neighborhood" school, and they would have given little, if any, thought to whether that particular school was educationally appropriate for each child. Even if they had, they could not have done much about it since their children would have been mandatorily assigned to the same school anyway.

Cambridge, though, has now abandoned the concept of the neighborhood school in favor of an enrollment policy known as controlled choice that seeks to accommodate the individual educational needs of different children by giving them access to different schools within the same public school system. Parents can select the schools they think are best for their kids. Schools, in turn, can no longer presume a captive group of customers and must compete for the parents' business.

Choice is a radical departure from the norm in American public education. Americans value choice and competition in most things. They want to be able to choose between McDonald's and Burger King, beaches and lakes, rare and well done, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings. Competition is viewed as essential to a vibrant economy. How else do you keep those who are providing goods and services on their toes and in touch with their customers' changing needs? When it comes to public schools, though, Americans have been content to tolerate a monopoly. Students have traditionally been assigned to school on the basis of their street address. Elementary schools feed into specific junior high schools, which feed into a specific high school. With the exception of an occasional magnet school—one organized around a particular theme, such as science or the arts, and available to students throughout the district—public education offers a one-meal menu. It is the Last Great Monopoly.

Such an arrangement, of course, fits nicely with the factory model of schooling, in which the primary concerns are standardiza-

tion, the efficiency of the system, and the convenience of the professional educators who run it. The factory model of education assumes that each and every school is adequate for each and every student. Thus assignments can be safely and quickly made at the stroke of a pen without reference to the differing needs or learning styles of students. Another plus is that principals and teachers can assume a captive audience and go about their business knowing that even if they fail to please parents and meet students' needs, they will not suffer any negative consequences.

American public schools are now being stripped of their monopoly. Parents are becoming increasingly sophisticated about the differing needs of their children, and as the failures of the factory model school become more and more apparent, they are becoming increasingly reluctant to surrender the freedom of choice that they presume in virtually every other sphere of their lives. On the other side of the fence, teachers, buoyed by the emerging sense of their own professionalism, are becoming excited about the possibility of introducing diversity to the school system and creating small educational units geared to specific programs and learning styles. Perhaps most important, an unlikely combination of outside political forces has arisen to push for change, an odd group of bedfellows united only by a conviction that traditional pupil-assignment policies now constitute a disaster.

Giving parents a voice in deciding which schools their children will attend at public expense is hardly a new idea. As early as 1955 the economist Milton Friedman was pushing the notion that parents should be given chits, or vouchers, that they could cash in as tuition at any school, public, private, or parochial. The basic argument was that if competition were introduced, the system would have to improve. Giving people the freedom to vote with their feet, the argument went, would force schools to shape up or shut down. Although the Office of Economic Opportunity ran a \$7 million experiment with vouchers in the early 1970s, liberals were, for the most part, suspicious of the idea, viewing it as a cover for channeling of public funds into private and, even worse, parochial schools.

In recent years the flag of parental choice has been taken up by a number of prominent corporate leaders interested in the improvement of public schools. The most prominent has been David Kear-

the former chairman of Xerox Corporation, who characterized public education as "a failed monopoly, bureaucratic, rigid and in unsteady control of dissatisfied captive markets." Kearns said, "Competition makes businesses perform. Choice can do the same for public schools." Now political liberals have taken up the cause as a matter of social justice. Parental choice, they argue, is already a fact of life for middle- and upper-class families, who exercise choice by purchasing houses or renting apartments in neighborhoods served by good schools. Justice says that the poor and lower middle class should have the same privileges. As Sy Fliegel, one of the architects of parental choice in Community District 4 in New York City, put it, "What's good enough for the rich is good enough for the poor."

Until recently any joining hands of liberals and conservatives in the cause of school choice was impossible because the Reagan administration, in pushing vouchers and tuition tax credits, made it clear that it wanted such devices to apply to nonpublic as well as public schools. Reagan administration officials expressed open admiration for the plan pushed through by then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain under which parents who are dissatisfied with the school their children are attending can "opt out" of it and start up their own schools at public expense. The irony was that, even as the administration was ramming up against brick walls in seeking aid to the nonpublic sector, prominent liberal Democrats such as former governor Rudy Perpich of Minnesota and Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas had come around philosophically to the wisdom of school choice. They simply wanted to limit it to choice among public schools.

On the eve of President Bush's inauguration in January 1989, Republican leaders saw the handwriting on the wall. They convened a White House conference on the topic of school choice, invited participants from across the political spectrum, and made a point of conspicuously avoiding any mention of the V-word—*vouchers*. School choice was, in effect, politically liberated. President Bush has described public-school choice as "a national imperative" and made it the centerpiece of his push to become the "education president." The administration created a new Center for Choice in Education with a toll-free number (1-800-442-PICK) for anyone wanting to learn more about it. Choice has also been formally endorsed by the National Governors' Association, which called it a necessity if the pub-

lic is to come to terms with "the nation's diversity and its demands for compulsory education." According to the Center for Choice, at least thirteen states now have laws offering some form of choice—Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Utah, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. Researchers estimate that 5 percent of public school children now live in areas where they have options that extend beyond the neighborhood school, double the percentage only two years ago.

School-choice plans take three basic forms. The oldest and most popular is *intradistrict* choice, in which local districts stop assigning students to schools automatically on the basis of their home address and in effect open up all schools to all students. Researchers estimate that as many as two thousand districts, from Montclair, New Jersey, to Irvine, California, have such plans. Most districts began doing this on their own, but now that the idea has spread, some states are taking steps to encourage it. Massachusetts has an aggressive program to promote intradistrict choice, and Colorado recently became the first state to mandate that all districts allow students to transfer freely within their borders.

Then came plans under which students have the opportunity not only to move around their home district but to attend school in other districts. This approach, known as *open enrollment*, was pioneered by Minnesota in 1988. Since then Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, Ohio, and Washington have enacted programs that permit interdistrict transfers. The plans vary widely in details, such as who, if anyone, picks up the transportation tab for students who want to study out of their home district and how much of their per-pupil state aid they can take with them to the new district. Some, such as Minnesota's open-enrollment plan, also permit high school students to study at colleges and universities. Tennessee has permitted interdistrict choice since 1925, and the number of students taking advantage of the option jumped to 20,000 in 1991, up by 4,000 over the previous year. The third, and latest, development has been a series of efforts to extend choice beyond the limits of the public schools. Wisconsin adopted a voucher-type plan that, starting in the fall of 1990, allows up to 1,000 Milwaukee public school students to enroll in private nonsectarian schools at state expense. By early 1991, the Bush administration was supporting this type of broader choice plan.

Although the basic motivation for the recent spate of school-choice plans has been to get kids into the schools that will best serve their needs, many of the earliest and most successful ones were initially established for quite a different social purpose: desegregation. That was the case in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Though known primarily as the home of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, a 6.2-square-mile city on the shores of the Charles River, is actually a diverse, bustling urban area, one of the ten most densely populated cities in the country. The population of 95,000 persons ranges from prosperous occupants of stately homes along Brattle Street, many from families that have lived there since colonial days, to immigrants from Haiti or Cambodia freshly arrived in the Cambridgeport area. Cambridge citizens come from sixty-four different countries and have forty-six mother tongues. Eighty-five percent of their children are enrolled in the public school system, which consists of thirteen elementary schools running up to the eighth grade and a single comprehensive high school. Half of the 7,500 students in the system are white. The other half breaks down into 30 percent black, 13 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent Asian. Half of the Cambridge students come from families poor enough to qualify for free and reduced-price lunches. Eleven percent are in bilingual programs, from Portuguese and Haitian to Korean and Vietnamese.

Cambridge had always run its schools in traditional fashion. The wealthy bought homes in the Peabody or Agassiz school districts, and if they were politically savvy and aggressive and knew the right kind of people, they could get their children into one of the system's alternative programs for the "academically talented." Residents who were poor, or who lived in one of Cambridge's working-class neighborhoods, had their own neighborhood schools, unless the children qualified as "culturally deprived" and went to Follow Through, a federally funded program, designed with Head Start "graduates" in mind, that emphasizes parental involvement and having students work at their own pace. There was also a thriving nonpublic sector that, during the 1950s and 1960s, attracted more than half of the city's school-age children. Hundreds of Italian and Irish families opted for Roman Catholic parochial schools, while many wealthy residents patronized exclusive private schools such as Belmont Hill or Shady Hill. The city's academicians thought so

little of the public schools that Harvard University did not even mention them in the informational literature it gave to married graduate-school students!

In the 1970s Cambridge residents looked with horror across the Charles River at racial strife in Boston, which was struggling to desegregate its schools under a court-ordered busing system. Whites were fleeing the system. Buses carrying blacks into white ethnic neighborhoods were stoned. "It was a nightmare," recalls Mary Lou McGrath, a school administrator who is now superintendent of the Cambridge school system. "We kept asking ourselves, Are we next?"

Cambridge already had its own problems. Despite the closing of several Catholic schools in the late 1960s, the number of white students in the system was declining. The city had several schools that were on the edge of being ruled segregated, so political and educational leaders decided on a preemptive strike. Rather than run the risk of having a judge step in and order forced busing—with all the disruption, hassle, and embarrassment that would have entailed—they decided to try to lure students into integrated settings of their own free choice.

The first stab at this came in 1979, when the School Committee, working with parents and teachers, adopted an open-enrollment option that gave all Cambridge students the option to transfer to schools outside their attendance zones so long as the change did not increase segregation. Not many students made the move, so the following year attendance zones were redrawn to bring about more racial integration. Students already assigned to a neighborhood school were grandfathered into it, but new students were assigned under the new rules. This was still not enough. So finally, in March 1981, neighborhood school zones were completely abolished. Cambridge decided to bring about racial balance by giving every student a crack at attending every school. The hope was that this would not only head off a court order but bring middle-class whites back into the public schools. For the first time Cambridge schools would be competing not only with the private and parochial sector but with each other!

Cambridge calls its system "controlled choice" because, while parents indicate their preferences, the school district makes the final decision. Here's how the system works: Parents of students in

kindergarten through eighth grade gather information about the thirteen schools and then list their first, second, and third choices in order of preference. Actually there are more than thirteen choices, since some of the schools have as many as four separate programs within them that qualify as distinct options. Families can, of course, choose the neighborhood school to which the children would have been automatically assigned before controlled choice went into effect. The preferences are then collected by Peter F. Colleary, the Student Assignment Director, and every month, starting in January, he assigns students to schools. Placements are made with racial balance in mind, with a school being considered desegregated if its racial balance falls within five percentage points, plus or minus, of the racial balance of the district as a whole. In addition to parental preferences, other priorities include availability of space, keeping siblings in the same school, and geographical proximity. In the event that there are still too many applicants for a particular school or program, a lottery is held. Students who are not accommodated with their first choice are automatically put on a waiting list for the next suitable vacancy. If they do not get any of their choices—something that happens to about 15 percent of students—they are put on waiting lists for all three preferences.

To help parents make their selections, each school hires a part-time "parent liaison" to meet with prospective families, give tours of the school, and answer questions. The district also operates a Parent Information Center that disseminates information on all thirteen schools as well as the ins and outs of the overall system and coordinates the work of each school's parent liaisons. No parent can register for elementary school unless they visit the official information center. A major task for Margaret Gallagher, who runs the Parent Information Center, is to educate parents who might not otherwise be aware of their rights, especially poor families and recent immigrants. Every November the district conducts three Kindergarten Information Sessions, where parents can hear presentations on the programs and the philosophy of each school. Gallagher canvasses local day-care centers and writes at least two hundred personal letters to parents of Head Start children. The center holds dozens of community meetings and advertises them on the radio and in foreign-language newspapers. Staff members follow up by calling parents who are known to have school-age chil-

dren but fail to register. Flyers are distributed in laundromats and supermarkets in several languages, and a twenty-four-hour telephone recording carries information on how to enroll. "Giving parents the information they need to make intelligent choices is the name of the game," says Gallagher. "You never think you have done enough."

Clearly, controlled choice makes no sense unless students and parents have legitimate options from which to make their selections. If every school is the same, then the right to choose is a hollow privilege. On this score Cambridge has done well. For demographic reasons, two elementary schools have closed over the last decade, reducing the number of options to thirteen, but the remaining schools have staked out their own particular character. Agassiz and Peabody, which in the old days were the elite schools populated by the Harvard Square crowd (Agassiz was dubbed the "Yuppie Puppy Palace"), continue to emphasize traditional basic academics, but they are no longer isolated enclaves of the white upper middle class. Robert F. Kennedy makes heavy use of the arts in teaching all subjects, while Morse makes creative use of drama. Haggerty, the smallest school in the system, offers conversational Spanish for all students and staff. Teachers at Fitzgerald have won fame for an emphasis on creative writing that has since spread to other schools, while Fletcher, whose test scores have traditionally been subterranean, has initiated a Coordinate Learning Project that puts a teaching aide in every classroom to focus on language skills, as well as a one-on-one reading program and an Early Morning Math and Computer Program that opens its doors at 6:45 A.M.

As a way of broadening their appeal, many of Cambridge's schools developed "schools within schools." Maynard adopted some ingenious approaches to bilingual education, including a so-called Amigos Program that puts Spanish-speaking and English-speaking students together in a two-way bilingual program. Harrington operates both a traditional curriculum and a Follow Through program. The Graham and Parks Alternative School specializes in open classrooms but also runs a Haitian bilingual program. Martin Luther King, Jr., combines a regular program emphasizing basic skills with an Open School program that promotes individualized learning, multicultural instruction, and parental involvement in

running the school. Tobin has three different options: an open-classroom track, offering individualized education and requiring heavy involvement by parents; a Computer School of the Future program, emphasizing basic skills through technology; and a Follow Through program. Cambridge has also extended the principle of diversity to its sole high school, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School. The regular school is divided into seven smaller houses, each with separate administrations, staffs, and special programs and its own academic style. Options include vocational education, a Fundamental School that focuses on discipline and traditional academics, a Pilot School built around a close-knit educational and social community of two hundred students, or the Enterprise Cooperative, a career-oriented program for students who have dropped out or who are unsuccessful in school. Its students operate food-service or woodworking shops, with profits divided among them at the end of the year.

Given Cambridge's abundance of world-class universities, research institutes, and schools of education, it is no surprise that a large number of the community's parents take their children's education very seriously and approach it in a sophisticated way. For such parents, controlled choice has obvious appeal. Take, for instance, Art and Betty Bardige, who live in a large, charcoal-blue, three-story house on Raymond Street, just off Porter Square on Avon Hill, about four blocks from Radcliffe College. The house, built in 1893 by a ship's captain from Martha's Vineyard, is situated near the "top of the hill"—an area mostly populated by professors at Harvard, journalists, and professionals. It has a large front porch that opens into a spacious hardwood entrance hall. The Bardiges use the basement and the first two floors and rent out the top floor to a mother and two children. The Bardiges have three children: Kori, Brennan, and Arran.

Art, born in Chicago, has a master's degree in education from the University of Chicago and taught high school physics in Florida before moving into the field of educational films. He now owns a computer software development firm. Betty, born in Boston, went to high school in Florida, where she and Art met, and has a doctorate in developmental psychology from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She has spent most of her subsequent career working in curriculum development. When they moved to Cam-

bridge, the Bardiges became involved in school politics, working for liberal groups interested in improving education. "You have a bunch of parents here who do not want to send their kids to private schools," says Art.

Kori, the Bardiges' oldest child, went to an alternative cooperative nursery school in the neighborhood and then enrolled in Peabody, the neighborhood school. Her parents plunged into school activities, with Art becoming head of the Parent-Teachers Organization and Betty, a room mother. Kori, a quiet child with light brown hair, large eyes, and a sweet, shy smile, had a hearing problem caused by ear infections and was struggling with reading and spelling. By the time Kori reached third grade, her parents began to worry about the curriculum and whether Kori was receiving the help she needed. She was making A's, but was having to work harder than her parents thought was advisable. "There was not enough attention to individual differences," said Betty. "There was a lack of educational leadership." They looked ahead and concluded that the two fourth-grade teachers at Peabody would simply be offering more of the same. Now was the time to switch. What Kori needed, they decided, was a more flexible and supportive classroom where she would get added attention. "She's a very bright child," said Betty. "That wasn't the issue." That spring they signed Kori up for the magnet program at the Tobin School. "It was a hard decision," says Art. "We felt like we had put a lot of effort into Peabody, but it was too rigid, too academic, too stiff. They were using a lot of textbooks and a lot of worksheets. We wanted a class where she would not be judged on how many problems she had done."

The Bardiges' second child, Brennan, was born in 1979 and was beginning to read at eighteen months. When it came time to enroll him in elementary school, they opted for the computer program at Tobin. Brennan was young for his class, socially and physically, but since he knew how to read, he was sent to classes with older students. Betty and Art liked the stimulation for their son, but they still wanted him to be in classes with his own peers. So they switched him over to the Follow Through program within the same school. "We feel our kids have gotten an excellent education here," said Art.

But the benefits of choice are by no means limited to professionals. Julio and Domingas Tavares, who live in a pastel-yellow

three-bedroom house on Cardinal Medeiros Street, are Cape Verdian by birth and spent most of their lives in Luanda, Angola, where both taught in an elementary school. They tired of the ongoing civil war in Angola, so in 1987 they followed other members of their family to Cambridge. Julio, who is thirty-eight, is a dishwasher at the Westin Hotel. Domingas is a utility aide in Cambridge Hospital, working from 7:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. On Tuesday and Thursday nights she goes to the Cambridge Adult Learning Center for English classes.

When it came time to enroll their two eldest daughters, Paula, now eleven, and Claudia, now ten, in school, Domingas had long talks about programs for foreign students with Donna Sousa, the parent liaison at the Harrington School, and decided that they needed the support of a Portuguese bilingual program. She enrolled them both in the program at Harrington. One of the things that she especially liked was the fact that the principal could speak to her in Portuguese. "If there are problems, he can explain it to me," she said.

With their sons, though, the Tavareses took a different approach. Hernani, now eight, an inquisitive child who wears heavy-framed glasses and cocks his head to one side when inspecting something new, started off in the Harrington bilingual program but after a year and a half was moved into the regular English-speaking classes. By the time their youngest child, Ivan, was ready for school, they decided to get him into an English-speaking program from the outset. All of the regular classes at Harrington were full, however, and it looked as if the only English-speaking classes would be at either Fletcher or Maynard, which would mean separating the children, something they did not want. So instead they arranged to keep Ivan at Harrington by enrolling him in its Follow Through program.

Domingas and Julio, who try to check their children's homework each night, concede that keeping up with so many different programs can be difficult. "Last year I really didn't have enough time to find out if the Follow Through program was good for Ivan," said Domingas. "Sometimes I can't get to the parents' meeting, and many times when I do get there, the meetings are finished and I don't have a chance to say anything. But I can't work only part-time and still pay the bills." Still, they are grateful for the choices that

they have. Domingas said that, with the help of the parent liaison, she feels as if she got good advice and was able to make wise choices for all of her children. Because of their language limitations her daughters needed to be in the bilingual classes, while the boys, who did not speak Portuguese as well, fit more easily into regular classes. "I like having so many programs," said Domingas. "Before I put my kids in a program, I like to talk to the teachers and to Donna. I try to talk to people whose children are in the program a long time and know what the programs taught. Here the teacher gives me a more important role in deciding what happens with my kids. They call me at work sometimes to let me know what my children are doing."

For some families, though, things do not go all that smoothly. Jim Sanders and his wife, Lin Tucker Sanders, lived in a triplex home on Magazine Street in Cambridgeport. When their eldest son, Justin, was about to enter kindergarten they began looking around at their educational options. They wanted a school with a structured classroom atmosphere and one where the principal shared their ideas about education. Unfortunately, they did not get any of their first three choices—Peabody, King Open, or Graham and Parks—and Justin was assigned to Morse. Since Morse was right down the street and Lin knew the teachers, she decided that the assignment was one that they could live with. But she asked to keep Justin's name on the waiting list at Peabody. When his name came up he was transferred to Peabody for his second year.

Peabody turned out to be something of a misfit for Justin. Kindergarten went smoothly, but during first grade Justin began showing signs of stress. After consulting with their family physician the Sanders decided that Peabody might be one of the reasons. When new signs of stress appeared early in the second grade, they knew he needed a change. They decided to try another school—this time an alternative program. But the alternative programs were already fully subscribed, and Justin was not reassigned. So the Sanderses took their only other course of action. They submitted a hardship appeal—one that, under the rules, allows parents to make special requests that their child be assigned to a particular type of school or program for medical or serious personal reasons. "By no means is it good enough to say that your child is not happy," Mrs. Sanders

explained. "You basically have to paint your child as a psychological basket case." The committee approved the petition, and Justin was placed at the top of the list for an alternative program. The following fall he entered Graham and Parks.

When it came time for the Sanderses' second son, Robert, to enter kindergarten they once again received none of their first three choices. He, too, ended up at Morse. "We have no luck in the lottery," said Jim. The Sanderses then joined forces with other parents pushing for more alternative schools in Cambridge, and they met with success. This year a new alternative kindergarten was opened at Morse, and Robert is enrolled. "I am basically a pro-choice person," Mrs. Sanders says. "We were ecstatic about the Graham and Parks transfer and the new alternative kindergarten. But just because we finally got our way with Justin doesn't mean the system doesn't need to change. We have persevered, but there are people who would have given up. The system needs to be more responsive to these people as well."

In other cases, frustration leads to changes within the system. Charles Wisner, an architect, and his wife, Kata Hall, moved to Cambridge from neighboring Somerville because they believed in public education and had heard good things about the choice system. They were especially enthusiastic about the chance to enroll their two sons, Benjamin, five, and Samuel, three, in alternative schools. "In Somerville we didn't feel like there was enough energy in the nontraditional classrooms," said Chuck. They settled in a newly renovated white Victorian house on Pleasant Street in the Cambridgeport section that was right across the street from the Graham and Parks School, which, as Kata put it, "was supposed to be one of the best alternative programs."

When it came time to enroll Benjamin in kindergarten, Kata, a graphic designer, visited eight different schools, but they listed Graham and Parks first because of its proximity. The other choices were also alternative schools. "We just figured, hey, something is going to work out," said Chuck. "The word was that, even if you didn't get one of your first three choices, you would get on the waiting list." When assignments were announced in March, though, the Wisners were disappointed. They were one of more than sixty families, out of more than five hundred with children entering kindergarten, who did not get any of their first three

percent in 1981. Standardized-test scores, flawed though they may be as measures of achievement, have also improved steadily since 1981.

Within the overall rise, some interesting positive trends can be discerned, including a narrowing of the gap between the performances of black students and white students. Cambridge can no longer identify racial minorities by test scores. Indeed, by eighth grade, minority students are actually outperforming white students in math and reading in 60 percent of the public schools. In some schools middle-class minority students outscore their white counterparts. Students from poor families do less well than those from more affluent homes. Social class alone now divides high-achievers from low-achievers. "I think we're a better school system," says McGrath, the Cambridge superintendent. "More children come to school with positive attitudes. Because of the competition, professional staff members have to pay attention to the educational program. The quality of leadership has improved, and there is more respect among the kids. There is greater understanding of cultural diversity. Kids from the projects go to birthday parties on Brattle Street. State basic-skills tests are going up."

One of the things that controlled choice had going for it politically in Cambridge was the fact that the concept of the neighborhood school had already begun to erode. The young middle-class newcomers who moved to Cambridge in the 1970s settled wherever they could find space in the city's tight housing market, and they shared none of their blue-collar neighbors' loyalty to neighborhood schools. Their eyes were quickly drawn to the Cambridge Alternative School and the handful of other magnet programs that got extra state and federal funds, were encouraged to be innovative, had school-based management long before the term became fashionable, and, most important, drew students from throughout the district. Indeed, by 1979 about one-third of the system's white students were enrolled in schools outside of their neighborhood school attendance district. This "unregulated choice" was one of the causes of racial imbalance in the first place.

Buoyed by the success in Cambridge, the state of Massachusetts is doing what it can to spread the concept. Sixteen other Massachusetts cities now operate controlled-choice plans. Since many of the cities are not as small or as compact as Cambridge, they

choices. The Wisners contacted some of these other families, and several meetings were held with school officials. "People were outraged that they could live a block away from a school and not get their kids in it," recalls Chuck. So they came up with a bold idea: Why not start a new alternative kindergarten? The parents shot off a series of petitions to the School Committee, and, accompanied by engineers, Chuck canvassed abandoned Roman Catholic parochial schools to test for asbestos. They found a suitable site in a former parochial school but ended up opening another kindergarten at Morse. "There is something exciting about opening a new program," said Kata. "Parents really feel they will be able to participate in this." In the end, since they needed only one classroom, school officials decided to go with the Morse site.

Such sensitivity to parental wishes and bureaucratic response is critical to the concept of "controlled choice"—not only for reasons of public relations and politics but because it is the key to building educational quality. "The rank ordering of schools of choice is a referendum on the attractiveness of all schools," says Charles Willie, a professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Those schools that are least preferred are alerted that they must develop plans to make themselves attractive to students. This process encourages the system to be continuously improving least-attractive schools." In short, the district seeks improvement in the overall system by constantly building up the weakest links in the chain. Michael Alves, a consultant who works closely with Willie, describes Cambridge's controlled choice as a "living reform" in which the system is, in effect, "re-created" every year. "Educational improvement becomes an explicit concern, and improvements are self-generated," he says. "The recurring question becomes, What do you do with schools that people do not want, like Kennedy and Fitzgerald?"

What are the results of controlled choice now that Cambridge has been doing it for a decade? Clearly the plan has achieved its original social purpose of creating a stable desegregated school system. Since 1981 the percentage of students opting for nonneighborhood schools has risen to 63 percent, making voluntary desegregation possible. No Cambridge school has drifted toward resegregation. More over choice has brought students back to the public schools. Ninety percent of Cambridge children opt for public schools, up from only 70