Choice-based reforms are the most controversial proposals to improve American education, yet little is known about how teachers view choice. The authors present the first systematic analysis of the factors that determine teacher attitudes toward school choice. Using a 1995 national mail survey of 900 public high school teachers (325 responded, a 42% response rate), we found that more experienced teachers and those who identify themselves as Democrats, majored in education as undergraduates, or who have never worked in a competitive educational environment are more likely to oppose public school choice. More experienced teachers and those who identify themselves as Democrats are also more likely to oppose private school choice, as are union members and teachers who teach in school cultures they deem negative. These findings are significant because teachers, both as classroom implementers of public policy and as political actors, help determine the impact of changes in education policy.

DECADES OF efforts at school reform have failed to quell national discontent with public education. In fact, the lack of evident progress produced by the frenzied reform efforts that characterized U.S. education in the 1980s (Elmore, 1997; Glasman & Glasman, 1990; Murphy, 1991) led to the proliferation of more dramatic reform efforts in the 1990s. One of the few points of consensus to emerge from the reform efforts that characterized that period

© 2000 Corwin Press, Inc.
(the 1980s and 1990s) was that the effectiveness of reforms depends largely on the teachers who actually implement the changes in classrooms (Hess, 1998; Wagner, 1994). In this study, we present an empirical analysis of the factors shaping teacher support for or opposition to school choice proposals. These data can help clarify the relationship between the characteristics of local teacher work forces and the likely consequences of efforts to enact or implement choice-based programs. Although the focus here is on teacher attitudes toward institutional reforms, the findings also have implications for our understanding of how teachers respond to more content-oriented school reforms.

Historically, reforms lacking the support of personnel in the classroom core have seldom managed to produce improvement in the schools (Elmore, 1996; Mirel, 1994; Pauly, 1991; Sarason, 1991, 1996). Particularly given their autonomy and isolation, teachers enjoy considerable power over how education policies are implemented (Lipsky, 1980) and how classrooms operate in practice (Elmore, 1997). Recognizing this reality, researchers have come to broad agreement that the keys to producing improved teaching and learning include increasing faculty commitment, cultivating teacher expertise, and attracting and retaining committed faculty (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Elmore, Peterson, & McCarthy, 1996; Fullan, 1991; Hess, 1999; M. J. Johnson & Pajares, 1996; Murphy, 1991; Odden, 1991).

In the 1990s, disappointment with pedagogical and curricular reform efforts increased the attention paid to more radical institutional remedies such as choice-based reforms (Nathan, 1996). Institutional reforms under discussion ranged from widely adopted proposals for charter schools to the more controversial proposals for voucher systems. As of 1999, charter schools and other kinds of choice options (such as magnet schools or cross-district open enrollment) existed in most states. In addition, a handful of locales experimented with publicly or privately funded voucher programs, which provide vouchers to subsidize tuition at private schools.

Despite the increasing incidence of choice-based programs, we know little about what teachers think about these efforts to remake the institutional environment of schooling. Perhaps more significant, we do not know why teachers may choose to support or oppose choice-based reforms. This second question is a politically significant issue. Not only is teacher support a crucial component in making reform work, but teachers and their unions are key actors in shaping the political fate of many efforts at education reform.

In a choice-based model, the role teachers play as implementers is theoretically distinct from their role in traditional school improvement arrangements. Advocates expect choice to improve education by subjecting public schools to competition and making public schools more like private schools,
with empowered teachers, clear goals, and lean administrative staffs (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Choice-based approaches require teachers to take a more entrepreneurial role in education and assume some tasks previously performed by administrators. For instance, some researchers have found that many of the most successful choice-based public schools have been started by teachers (Fliegel, 1993; Nathan, 1996). Teachers would be expected to exercise initiative by starting schools or by taking a more active role running smaller, more focused, less bureaucratic schools.

Although teacher opposition may critically hamper the implementation of traditional school reforms, resistance would have a somewhat different effect under choice-based proposals that alter the institutional structure of schooling. Because choice-based proposals engender competition, teacher opposition or reticence may not be as daunting an obstacle as it is normally. With time, alternative schools can open, and students can flow toward schools that excel in the new environment. This kind of natural selection will tend to reward schools and teachers that adapt, helping to solve the implementation problem in the long term. However, because even proximate competitive pressures are likely to take a significant period of time to emerge, the receptiveness of teachers to choice-based approaches will have significant short-term and intermediate-term effects. The most obvious problem is that if an insufficient number of public school teachers are willing to work in choice-based schools, then those schools may be difficult to staff, and parents may be discouraged from choosing them. Similarly, if most private school teachers oppose the use of public vouchers to fund private schooling, private schools may be more reluctant to open their doors to such students.

Although the teacher unions oppose the stronger versions of school choice and even opposed the softer alternative of charter schooling into the mid-1990s, the official union stance may not clearly reflect the preferences of the membership. For example, whereas Feistritzer (1992, p. 49) finds that Democrats outnumber Republicans among public school teachers by a modest 42% to 31% margin, teacher unions almost uniformly support Democratic candidates in elections (Lieberman, 1997, p. 66). Despite absolute union opposition to choice, both a 1989 American Teacher Survey conducted by Metropolitan Life and a 1990 National Center for Education Information survey found that 53% of public school teachers favored letting parents "choose the schools their children attend" (Feistritzer, 1992, p. 40).

DETERMINANTS OF TEACHER ATTITUDES

We know very little about what shapes teachers' opinions about choice-based arrangements. In fact, we have very little systematic knowledge about
what shapes teachers’ attitudes toward any kind of school reform. Previous research has rarely attempted to isolate those variables that make teachers more or less receptive to particular reform efforts. Instead, studies of reform have generally used observation and interviews to explore teacher responses to a particular reform in one school or a handful of schools. The few surveys conducted have found some certain regularities in the forces influencing teacher attitudes.

A study of 12,000 Chicago teachers examining the impact of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 found that teachers in schools with shared decision making, strong leadership, teacher collegiality, and community support are more likely to support reform than teachers not in such schools (Sebring & Camburn, 1992). Katz, Dalton, and Glaquinta (1994) surveyed 280 middle school home economics teachers and supervisors in New York, finding that receptiveness to state reform increased with in-service training, increased resources, and job security. F. M. Page and Page (1989) surveyed 302 current and former State Teachers of the Year with regard to several school reforms, finding significant differences in opinion between secondary and elementary teachers, older and younger teachers, and teachers with different educational backgrounds. The teachers favored measures that increased salaries and funding and opposed those that included longer days or the use of standardized testing to evaluate students or teachers. J. A. Page and Page’s (1988) study surveyed 97 social science teachers in Georgia and found they were most receptive to reforms that increased salary and funding, used mentor teachers, and increased school partnerships with universities.

The most frequently discussed determinants of teacher receptiveness to reform in the broader literature are the teacher’s length of service and the nature of the local school culture. Veteran teachers become cynical about reform because, in recent decades, they have witnessed numerous reform efforts that have come and gone (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Hess, 1998; Hill, Pierce, & Guthrie, 1997; S. M. Johnson, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Wagner, 1994). Discouraging personal experiences with reform encourage veteran teachers to view reform efforts as an institutional imposition. Veteran teachers who “have watched wave after wave of educational ‘reform’ ” come and go lose interest in changes that promise to yet again remake education (Mohrman & Lawler, 1996, p. 117). Veteran faculty also have more time, energy, and self-regard invested in the current state of affairs. Consequently, it is hypothesized that veteran teachers are less likely to support reform, regardless of the morale of their school faculty.

A large body of scholarship suggests that a second key factor in shaping teachers’ attitudes is likely to be the culture at their schools. Research
suggests that school cultures are tenacious and tend to perpetuate traditional work arrangements and the attitudes that underlie them (Cuban, 1984; Stolp & Smith, 1997; Tyack & Tobin, 1994). Teachers inducted into these cultures have their views of schooling shaped by these experiences, their relationships with fellow teachers and administrators, the institutional demands of their role, and the culture of their schools (Blase & Anderson, 1995; Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1993). In particular, teachers who work in focused, positive, supportive cultures are more likely to view change as a constructive opportunity (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Westheimer, 1998). Conversely, teachers who feel a lack of support in the school often seek to buffer themselves from external problems (Lortie, 1975; Proefriedt, 1994). These isolated and fearful teachers are likely to view any proposed change or leadership initiative with distrust. We expect such teachers to be particularly hostile to such radical proposals as school choice. Consequently, teachers in schools with negative cultures are hypothesized to be less likely to support choice-based reforms, regardless of the length of time the teacher has taught.2

Third, teacher union opposition to school choice may either reflect or influence membership opinions. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers strongly oppose school vouchers, and both organizations often oppose public school choice (Harmer, 1994; Lieberman, 1997). Institutionally, teacher unions are powerful political actors that benefit from their control of the labor force and therefore have a strong interest in maintaining the monopoly position of the public schools (Eberts & Stone, 1984). We hypothesize that teachers who belong to unions will be more likely to oppose school choice, particularly private school choice.3

Fourth, partisan beliefs may influence policy attitudes. It is likely that more politically conservative teachers, presumably due to their faith in the promise of markets, will be more likely to endorse choice-based remedies. Consequently, other things equal, Republicans are expected to be more likely than Democrats to embrace market-based public policy.4 Whether any partisan differences that emerge are due to fundamentally different views of markets, or a tendency to adopt the partisan line over time, cannot be determined in this study.

Fifth, it is hypothesized that teachers who majored in education will view choice less favorably than those who did not. Due to their immersion in education schools and the culture of schooling during their college years, it seems likely that education majors will have a stronger emotional attachment to traditional conceptions of public schooling. They also have a greater investment in the certification requirements implicit in public education and are relatively less likely to have career options outside of K-12 schooling,
which will make the prospect of competition relatively more frightening. Finally, with a few notable exceptions, such as Central Michigan University (Hill et al., 1997), undergraduate schools of education have not generally endorsed the notion of school choice.

A final factor that may influence teacher opinion on public school choice is the extent to which teachers already work in competitive environments. However, the likely direction of this effect is unclear. Does exposure to public school choice increase or decrease teacher support? Little empirical work has been done on this issue, but the policy implications are significant. In particular, if teacher support for public school choice increases with exposure to competition, then this will facilitate implementation of the policy, but the opposite will occur if exposure has the opposite effects. Because many school districts feature some type of public school choice but only a handful of the nation’s districts have some version of private school choice, the competition variable used in this article measures the extent of local public school choice.

METHOD

The most effective way to gather data on teacher attitudes toward school reforms was by administering a mail survey. The data for this study were collected through a national survey of 900 public high school teachers that was conducted in May 1995. The sample universe included all high school teachers in the United States. Of the 900 teachers contacted, approximately 120 had moved to another position or retired. In response to the initial contact and to a follow-up mailing, a total of 325 teachers returned surveys, yielding a survey return rate of 42%. Analysis of demographic data indicates that the survey respondents were statistically representative (within a 95% confidence interval) of the high school teaching population in terms of gender, race, and terminal degree. The sample’s geographic and age distribution also reflected that of the national teacher population. The survey asked teachers a variety of questions about their school environments, their personal teaching practices, and their attitudes with regard to a number of proposed school reforms.

Dependent Variable

The quantity of interest is teacher attitudes toward school choice programs. Two dependent variables are used to measure teacher feelings about choice. Each variable measures respondent reaction to a different kind of school choice. Respondents reported their support for or opposition to each proposal using a 6-point scale. The six categories ranged from strongly
support on one anchor (variable value = 1) to strongly oppose on the other (variable value = 6). Hence, an increase in the value of the dependent variable indicates growing opposition to school choice.

In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their feelings with regard to eight types of choice. For purposes of analysis, we have restricted consideration to the most comprehensive public and the most comprehensive private options because these are most likely to illuminate the relationships in which we are interested. (For full question wording, refer to the appendix.)

When asked to consider public school choice, respondents were presented with the following plan: "Minnesota allows public school choice. With a few exceptions (e.g., maintaining desegregation), parents can choose any public school in a state, regardless of district lines. Per-pupil state subsidies then follow the student." Respondents indicated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the plan.

In considering the private school choice option, respondents indicated how they felt about the following proposals: "Milwaukee gives low-income parents vouchers they can use at any nonreligious private school. Would you support such a plan for all parents if it included religious schools as well?"

Note that this question used the Milwaukee example only to explain to respondents the notion of a universal voucher program, one that would be available to all families and would offer a choice of all schools.

Table 1 summarizes teacher opinion of the two choice options analyzed. Teachers were evenly split in their opinions of public school choice, but they overwhelmingly opposed private school choice.

Explanatory Variables

We hypothesize that opinions with regard to choice will be influenced by the following independent variables. The manner in which the variables were operationalized is explained below. In all cases, the effect of the explanatory variables on teacher attitudes is modeled as a linear relationship. We recognize that this assumption may not be justified in all cases, particularly for teacher experience and school cultures. We would certainly encourage future researchers to examine whether the relationships we examine can be better modeled in a nonlinear fashion. However, for the purposes of the current study—which is the first effort to systematically examine the determinants of teacher attitudes toward choice—we believe the linear assumptions to be useful.

Experience is measured by subtracting the year the respondent joined the teaching profession from 1995.

School culture is measured using a teacher evaluation of the culture in his or her school. The morale of the school culture is measured using an index
Table 1
Summary of Teacher Support for Choice Options, in Percentages (N = 325)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public School Choice</th>
<th>Private School Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly support</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakly support</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakly oppose</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly oppose</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that was composed by adding three distinct agree-disagree questions (on which the values ranged from 1 to 6). Consequently, the composite ranges from 3 to 18, where an 18 indicates most positive and a 3 indicates most negative.7

Union membership is measured by a dichotomous variable where 1 is union membership and 0 is nonmembership.

Political party is measured by a self-reported score in which the respondent indicated his or her political views on a scale that ranges from 1 (a strong Republican) to 7 (a strong Democrat).

Whether a respondent majored in education was measured as a dichotomous variable based on the response to a question about undergraduate major. If a teacher’s sole undergraduate major was education, then this variable is coded as a 1; otherwise, it is coded as a 0.

Exposure to public school competitive pressure was measured by asking teachers if their students were allowed to transfer to other public high schools within their school districts and/or across district lines. Teachers who said yes to both queries are considered as working within a competitive environment and are coded 1 on a dichotomous variable for competition. For all other teachers, the value for this variable is 0.

Two other variables are included to control for the effects of economic and racial variation in the teacher’s school environments. Respondents were asked to estimate whether most of the students at their schools are from low-income, middle-income, or high-income families.8 Research suggests that teachers in schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students face particularly severe challenges, and these teachers may respond to choice-based remedies differently than do other teachers. For purposes of analysis, this variable was coded into a dummy variable that is a 1 if the teacher indicated a majority of students were from low-income families and a 0 otherwise.
Teachers were also asked to estimate the percentage of non-Hispanic White students in their schools. For a number of reasons, teachers in disadvantaged or minority communities may feel differently about the prospects of school choice than do teachers in other communities. The variable used is the teacher’s estimate of his or her school’s non-Hispanic White population.

RESULTS

The data were analyzed using ordinary least squares regression. Regression results for the analysis of public school choice are presented in Table 2, and regression results for the analysis of private school choice are presented in Table 3. Findings in both models are generally consistent with the theoretical expectations. As stated earlier, because higher values on the dependent variable indicate increasing opposition to choice, a positive sign on a coefficient indicates hostility to choice. When interpreting results, recall that because the dependent variable is on a 1 to 6 scale, the total interval spans 5 points. For ease of explanation, recognize that a coefficient of 0.5 is equivalent to a 10% shift in the variable.9

The positive values for Democratic party affiliation and more teaching experience in Table 2 demonstrate that consistent with the hypotheses, these teachers evince significantly less support for public school choice. That is, teachers who are more politically Democratic and who are more experienced are less likely to support choice programs. Similarly, teachers who majored in education in college were less likely to support public school choice. All of these findings are consistent with expectations. Teachers who had a larger educational investment in education, who had spent more of their careers in the schools, or who were ideologically committed to a Democratic conception of schooling were significantly less receptive even to the notion of public school choice. Exposure to a competitive public school environment appeared to increase support for public school choice (note the negative coefficient in Table 2). The model explained about 7% of the total variance in teacher attitudes toward public school choice. There is, of course, no way to tell how much of the unexplained variance was due to an incompletely specified model and how much was due to naturally occurring random variation in teacher attitudes.

Table 3 demonstrates that the explanatory model proved somewhat more powerful in explaining support for private school choice. Consistent with expectations, teacher experience, Democratic party affiliation, and union membership significantly increased opposition to private school choice. Meanwhile, contrary to expectations, teaching in a school culture that the teacher rated as positive had the effect of significantly increasing opposition
Table 2
**Teacher Opinions of Public School Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.552**</td>
<td>0.599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher experience (in years)</td>
<td>0.023*</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture (3 to 18, 18 = most positive)</td>
<td>0.041</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union member (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.142</td>
<td>0.274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party (1 to 7, 1 = strong Republican)</td>
<td>0.129*</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education major (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.827*</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive public school system environment (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-0.529*</td>
<td>0.234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority of students from low-income families (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-0.030</td>
<td>0.251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students who are non-Hispanic Whites</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Number of cases = 240. Corrected $R^2 = .067.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 3
**Teacher Opinions of Private School Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.926**</td>
<td>0.574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher experience (in years)</td>
<td>0.036**</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture (3 to 18, 18 = most positive)</td>
<td>0.094**</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union member (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.544*</td>
<td>0.257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party (1 to 7, 1 = strong Republican)</td>
<td>0.237**</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education major (1 = yes)</td>
<td>-0.170</td>
<td>0.340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive public school system environment (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.184</td>
<td>0.224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority of students from low-income families (1 = yes)</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0.240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of students who are non-Hispanic Whites</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Number of cases = 242. $R^2 = .145.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

to private school choice. The model was able to explain approximately 15% of the total variation in teacher attitudes toward private school choice.

The results for the analysis of public school choice in Table 2 suggest that each year of teaching experience served to slightly reduce support for choice. The result was that a 25-year veteran was about 10% less likely to support public choice than was a novice teacher ($p < .05$). The effects of experience are consistent with past research on the impact of teacher experience on receptiveness to reform. In short, the longer a teacher teaches, the more resistant to change he or she becomes. This is presumably due in part to acculturation and in part to an investment in the existing institution.
The significant negative effect of majoring in education as an undergraduate suggests that education majors are less receptive to choice-based reforms, presumably for some of the same reasons that veteran teachers are more hostile to school choice. Majoring in education had a large substantive effect, as people who had not majored in education as undergraduates were more than 15% more likely to support public choice than were education majors ($p < .05$). The findings on the effect of teacher experience and of having majored in education suggest that the composition of the contemporary teaching workforce, with its preponderance of veteran teachers and education majors, may inhibit efforts to promote public school choice. However, they also suggest that the impending wave of teacher retirements and increasingly aggressive efforts to recruit teachers from nontraditional sources may have the unanticipated effect of also increasing the teaching work force's receptiveness to school choice.

Exposure to a competitive public school environment increased support for public choice by 10.6% ($p < .05$). The finding that exposure to public school competition leads to increased teacher acceptance of public school choice suggests that implementation of public school choice is likely to become easier over time, all else equal. This is because the introduction of a program appears to soften—rather than strengthen—opposition among local teachers.

Finally, even after controlling for teaching experience and union membership, Democratic affiliation reduced support for public school choice. Moderate Democrats, other things equal, were about 10% less likely to support choice than were moderate Republicans ($p < .05$). Neither union membership nor school culture had a statistically significant effect on attitudes toward public choice.

The results from the private school choice analysis in Table 3 show that teacher experience played a more significant role in explaining opposition to private school choice than it did in the case of public school choice. The typical 25-year veteran teacher was about 18% more opposed to choice, other things equal, than the typical novice teacher ($p < .01$). Again, this comports with previous research that suggests that experienced teachers generally oppose efforts at reform. Comparing the effects in Table 3 with those in Table 2 suggests that veteran teachers are nearly twice as hostile to private sector competition as they are to public school choice programs. This finding makes intuitive sense, as teachers who have a longer standing commitment to the public schools have both personal and institutional reasons to view private sector competition with a skeptical eye.

On the other hand, contrary to expectations, teachers who reported the local school culture as being moderately positive (a 14 on the 3 to 18 scale)
rather than moderately negative (a 7 on the scale) tended to be about 12% more opposed to private school choice than were their less happily ensconced peers ($p < .01$). Other things equal, teachers who rated their school cultures as negative were more willing to entertain private sector competition. On further consideration, this effect may have at least two sources. Recall that we had expected negative work environments to generally poison the way teachers regarded any proposal for change. However, teachers who feel negatively about their present schools may believe that private competition could shake up the leadership and routines of the school, making it a more appealing and productive environment. Or, these teachers may believe that the increased presence of private schools will offer them more alternatives to their current posting. Similarly, teachers in a positive school culture may not want anything to happen that is likely to rock the boat and put their comfortable status quo at risk. Regardless, it appears that negative cultures do not breed resistance to change as some research has previously suggested and as we hypothesized earlier.

Consistent with our hypothesis, union members were about 10% more opposed to private school choice than were other teachers ($p < .05$). As mentioned previously, we cannot determine how much of this effect is due to the kinds of teachers who become union members and how much reflects the manifestation of official union hostility to school choice. The fact that union opposition was strongly significant for private school choice and not for public school choice may imply either that unions have worked harder at stirring member opposition to private competition or that union members themselves are particularly inclined to oppose private competition.

Political party affiliation had almost twice as strong an effect on support for private choice as it did on support for public choice. A moderate Democrat, other things equal, was almost 20% more opposed to private school choice than was a moderate Republican ($p < .01$). This is consistent with expectations, as it parallels the nation’s larger political discourse. This finding also suggests that the partisan leanings of the nation’s teaching force are particularly likely to have substantive effects on the issue of private school choice.

In the case of private sector choice, unlike the case of public choice, neither exposure to public competition nor having been an undergraduate education major had statistically significant effects. This was due not to changes in the standard errors for these variables, which were almost unchanged, but to the coefficients’ changing dramatically when teachers responded to private rather than to public choice. Apparently, the effects of experience with public school competition and of undergraduate training have dissimilar effects on how teachers think about private sector and public sector reforms. This
finding is especially surprising in the case of undergraduate education majors. These respondents were more hostile to public choice than the average teacher, and we had hypothesized that they would be even more virulently opposed to public choice. We are uncertain as to why the hypothesized effect may not have materialized.

CONCLUSIONS

Because teachers are central to efforts at education reform, the factors that shape teacher receptiveness or resistance to any given reform should be a consideration for educators and policy makers. In this national study of public high school teachers—the first study to systematically examine the determinants of teacher attitudes toward school choice—we found considerable variation in how teachers viewed two kinds of choice plans. In the aggregate, teachers were split on public school choice plans and strongly opposed to private school choice plans. More interesting than these aggregate findings, which have been repeatedly documented, were results showing that teachers were not monolithic in their opinion of choice but that their views varied in significant ways with their environment, background, and experience.

We find that the ongoing changes in the nation's teacher work force may have surprisingly important implications for the prospects and implications of school choice programs. Generational replacement of teachers, efforts to recruit new kinds of teachers, and the spread of public choice plans may all serve to increase teacher receptiveness to at least some forms of school choice.

In particular, we found that teacher experience significantly increases opposition to either public or private choice. Given the influential positions that veteran teachers wield in schools and in the teacher unions as well as the heavy concentration of veteran teachers in many of the most troubled school districts, advocates of choice can expect to encounter stiff opposition from the current teaching force. At the same time, it appears that teachers in more negative school cultures are more willing to entertain proposals for private school choice.

Because previous research suggests that rudderless and dysfunctional schools are most common in troubled school districts, the strong effects of teacher experience and negative school morale may tend to cancel each other out when the topic is school choice. However, the fact that teachers in negative school cultures supported private school choice but not public school choice may indicate that teachers in negative school cultures do not see public school choice as likely to improve their situation. This fact may mean that—contrary to conventional wisdom—in districts with extremely negative
school cultures, teachers may actually be more receptive to private school choice plans than to public school choice plans.

The data also suggest that teachers will be more receptive to proposals for school choice in districts where the teaching force includes fewer experienced teachers, fewer former education majors, and fewer union members. As the teaching workforce is currently entering a period of significant turnover, while education certification programs are encouraging undergraduates to major in subjects other than education, changes in the structure of the profession may have an important impact on the fate of choice proposals. In particular, radical proposals to reform the teaching profession, such as the modification of tenure (Hess & Maranto, 1999) or of collective bargaining (DeMitchell & Streshley, 1996), could have significant effects on aggregate teacher attitudes about school choice programs.

A second key implication of the findings we present is that teacher support for public choice plans may be likely to grow over time if teachers are exposed to these plans. Exposure to public choice does not have a similar impact on receptiveness to private school choice, presumably because private choice includes a number of features (i.e., open markets, religious education) not present in public school choice and because public choice includes safeguards that minimize the negative consequences of competition for teachers. This finding suggests that political victories by public choice advocates may encounter fewer implementation problems and less political opposition over time, but that public choice victories will not necessarily translate similarly in the case of private school choice.

Our findings suggest that the political and implementation prospects for public school choice currently appear to be significantly brighter than those for private school choice. The base of support among teachers for public choice is broader, and the opposition among pivotal groups of teachers is more muted. Our findings could help to explain why charter schools, which are a variation of public school choice, have enjoyed phenomenal political success and growth during the 1990s, whereas private school voucher plans have enjoyed little success. However, as of 1999, publicly funded voucher plans are currently operating in only Milwaukee, Cleveland, and selected locations in Florida, meaning that public school teachers have little concrete experience with private school choice. Would actual experience with this policy make teachers more receptive to it, as in the case of public school choice? Given the current policy interest in vouchers and other choice-based education remedies, this is an important topic for future research. An assessment of how the opinions of public school teachers in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida have changed over time may be a useful starting point for addressing this question.
A second question for future research is whether resistance among teachers is as significant an obstacle for choice-based reforms as it has proved to be for past reform efforts. Because choice-based reforms explicitly promise to break the near-monopoly position currently enjoyed by the traditional public school systems, opposition among teachers in those systems may prove to be less educationally significant than it has been in the past.

It is important to remember that our research was conducted at a specific point in time and that it surveyed only public high school teachers. The relationship between the explanatory variables and teacher attitudes may not be constant but may be subject to changes in the local school situation or the larger political environment. Similarly, the determinants of support for choice may operate differently in elementary schools, middle schools, junior high schools, or in the private sector. In addition, whereas we have been able to examine teacher attitudes toward proposed institutional reforms, the observed dynamic may not be generalizable to teacher response to content-based or pedagogical reforms.

Our primary concern in this research was to focus attention on the questions of teacher attitudes toward school reform and what shapes these attitudes. We strongly encourage other researchers to consider the relationships we have examined and how these relationships play out similarly or differently in other contexts. Regardless of one’s normative inclinations on the topic of school choice, the question of what explains teacher attitudes and how those forces are likely to shape political debate and policy implementation loom as major concerns.

APPENDIX

Here is the full text of the questions on school choice that teachers were asked to answer.

*Please Tell Us Your Opinions On School Choice.*

Some school choice plans use only public schools, whereas others give parents vouchers for either public or private schools. Supporters argue that school choice empowers parents and teachers, reduces bureaucracy, promotes agreement on school goals, increases opportunity for poor children, improves academic performance, and provides outlets for students the public schools have difficulty educating. Opponents contend that school choice is difficult to implement, threatens public education, weakens standards, presents transportation difficulties, blurs the division between church and state, and reduces equity because some parents make poor decisions. Please give us your views on the public school choice and voucher plans outlined below.
There are four main types of public school choice:

In schools-within-schools plans, small groups of teachers devise their own curricula, and parents choose among these options for their children. In effect, this creates several small, autonomous schools within a single school building. Do you support schools within schools plans?

In systems with magnet schools, parents choose among various public schools with different programs.

Some states allow charter schools: Groups of teachers or parents can petition their local school board for permission to start new public schools with alternative learning styles or curricula.

Minnesota allows public school choice. With a few exceptions (e.g., maintaining desegregation), parents can choose any public school in a state, regardless of district lines. Per-pupil state subsidies then follow the student.

Milwaukee gives low-income parents vouchers they can use at any nonreligious private school.

Would you support vouchers for low-income parents who want their children to attend nonreligious private schools?

Would you support such a plan if it included religious schools as well?

Would you support giving vouchers to all parents (not just low-income parents) to send their children to any nonreligious school, public or private?

Would you support such a plan for all parents if it included religious schools as well?

NOTES

1. Lipsky (1980) used the term street level bureaucrat to describe those public sector employees, such as teachers, who are able to substantially shape the substance of public policy by the manner in which they implement, or refuse to implement, proposed changes.

2. It is possible that environmental factors tend to concentrate veteran teachers in more negative school environments. However, in our sample, teacher experience and school morale were uncorrelated (Pearson’s r of .00). Consequently, the analysis is able to independently examine both hypotheses.

3. Do the unions reflect the preferences of working teachers, or are they a reflection of the institutional interests of the unions? There is an endogeneity problem here, but we are unable to determine the causal direction of this relationship in the current study. The data do not permit us to investigate whether teachers who join the union are more opposed to choice-based remedies or whether membership in the union causes teachers to become opposed to school choice.

4. In addition, Republicans tend to be more supportive of religious values, which are given more expression in private education (Hunter, 1991). This may also induce Republican teachers to look more favorably on school choice.

5. For instance, one piece of evidence suggesting that education majors may have fewer job options than their peers is that education majors tend to have low test scores and grades relative to their peers (Ferris & Winkler, 1986; Monk, 1989).
6. Given the controversy about choice, careful question wording is important. We consulted 11 education experts and pretested the question with six private school and five public school teachers before settling on the wording that was used.

7. The three statements used to compose this variable are (a) "The learning environment in this school is not conducive to school achievement for most students," (b) "The principal seldom consults with staff members before he or she makes decisions that affect us," and (c) "I sometimes feel it is a waste of time to try to do my best as a teacher."

8. Though imprecise, this question has been found to be valid in previous teacher surveys (C. E. Feistritzer, 1994, personal communication).

9. For example, a 0.5 change from 1.5 to 2.0 is equivalent to a movement of 10% along the interval that spans from 1.0 to 6.0.

10. The value 10.6% is generated because the coefficient of 0.529 is 10.6% of the 5-point interval between dependent variable values of 1 through 6.

REFERENCES


