Decision-making and choice: an investigation to determine why high school students in the Providence, Rhode Island school system chose to attend magnet programs.

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DECISION-MAKING AND CHOICE: AN INVESTIGATION TO DETERMINE WHY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE PROVIDENCE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL SYSTEM CHOSE TO ATTEND MAGNET PROGRAMS

A Dissertation Presented

By

LYNN HOWARD SMITH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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February 1985

Education
DECISION-MAKING AND CHOICE: AN INVESTIGATION TO DETERMINE WHY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE PROVIDENCE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL SYSTEM CHOSE TO ATTEND MAGNET PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

DECISION-MAKING AND CHOICE: AN INVESTIGATION TO DETERMINE WHY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE PROVIDENCE RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL SYSTEM CHOSE TO ATTEND MAGNET PROGRAMS

(February 1985)

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The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons, or influencers, responsible for helping Providence, Rhode Island, public school students to decide to attend one of its magnet programs. The magnet programs studied were organized in 1978 as alternatives to established, traditional courses of study offered within the high schools. The study specifically sought to determine whether the following influencers were involved in students' decisions: (1) parents, (2) peers, (3) teachers/counselors. Additionally, the study sought to determine whether students were influenced by other factors, namely: the reputation of the school and activities provided by the District with the intent of exposing the program to students and parents. Magnet program administrators identified a date and class period that would produce, system-wide: (1) a sufficient number of students, and (2) a student group that typified
the District, and the programs', racial, sex, and class-standing characteristics. One-hundred-and-fifteen students were tested system-wide on the same date and hour in June, 1982, using the Magnet Program Student Survey developed for the study. The survey consisted of 28 items which included: demographics; extent of career counseling prior to program entry; questions pertaining to how they were made aware of the programs offered, and whether their career decisions had been established; and having experienced the program, did it meet their expectations. With the exception of one item to solicit their comments, the balance of the items solicited data about the influencers' involvement in the decisions.

The responses were analyzed item-by-item. They were then organized and analyzed into: demographics, specific influencers, and other factors. Finally, conclusions were made between influencers, influencers and demographics, and influencers and other factors.

The findings of the study suggest that, in ranking the influencers, parents were the most influential and supportive persons in the students' decision-making process. The next group identified was the combined group of counselors/guidance activities. Peers/students already in magnet programs constituted the next most
important group to influence students' decisions. The final group to be identified, in 25 percent of the responses, was teachers.
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III. METHODOLOGY

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Experimentation and research suggest practices that seem likely to increase the effectiveness of the high school in giving a functional education to more young people. Primarily these practices involve developing a close active relation . . . between the school and the responsible adult community so that the student will find questions and problems outside the school that can be attacked by what he learns in school.

Each spring, high schools through America award diplomas confirming that their students have successfully completed requirements for graduation. Those requirements, in most schools, are measured by a degree of success exhibited in academic pursuits such as mathematics, science, and English. Implied in that confirmation is that the student has exhibited consistency in attendance, respect for authority, cooperation and all other attributes which constitute acceptable school citizenship. The majority of those students pursue and meet those requirements in our comprehensive, or traditional high schools. Many students are not successful. What happens to them?

Data show that during the years 1968 to 1970, an average of 742,000 students, ages 14-17, dropped out.

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That figure "gives credence to the fact that the standard offerings simply do not meet the needs of all students."³

If nearly 750,000 school-age students leave our schools each year without diplomas, then two concerns are in order, namely:

(1) What have the school, community, and home defined as the purpose and value of the formal school?

(2) Have the schools translated and put into action a series of activities that allow students to effectively understand and meet those defined purposes?

Proposed Schooling

As early as the 1940's, Jacques Maritain wrote that . . . "the prime goal of education is the conquest of internal and spiritual freedom to be achieved by the individual person. or, in other words, his liberation through knowledge and wisdom, good will, and love."⁴

Maritain, a noted Catholic philosopher, saw education as the vehicle by which the individual gains his/her independence through knowledge into, or inquiry. Maritain was concerned with the individual's personal life and spiritual


progress as the ultimate end of education. Alexander S. Rippa, author of Education in a Free Society, however, described education as being more responsible for developing the social potential of the person. He maintained that the school must sustain its students "until every youth has a chance to complete successfully a program which is of value to himself and society."\(^5\)

Addressing the purpose and value of the school, Cole S. Brembeck offered that "the school is created by the larger society around it to perform certain education functions . . . the school is an instrument of the community, designed to achieve goals which the community finds it difficult otherwise to achieve."\(^6\) Those functions and goals, while not always concretely stated, are to provide the necessary methods and skills which will allow students to become fully functioning adults.

A problem, however, is that the school often loses sight of its function and goals. When the methodological options of educating are not incorporated with the desired ends, schools (administrators, teachers, and support personnel) by their actions and philosophy are at a loss


to maintain those students not able to respond to the standard course of study. Some, such as the 750,000 mentioned, exit schools early but, as Stephen K. Bailey pointed out, an equally important group is "the students who remain in schools unable to find themselves or what they need. They include a few gifted students . . . and larger numbers of average students, turned off or yet to be turned on, whose diplomas will facilitate their entry to neither job nor college." 7

What has happened to cause our schools to be so unresponsive to our needs? One might, as J.M. Stephens suggested, attribute the lack of response to a "suspected inertia or laziness behind the school's preoccupation with academic matters, and behind its stubborn and regrettable refusal to take on the responsibility for developing character and an integrated way of life." 8 Rippa, by contrast, stated that it is the lack of a pro-active public/parental relationship that preached and promoted the concept that "students will acquire the basic concepts and skills which encourage intelligent and responsible action in American life," 9 that causes schools

9 Rippa, op. cit., p. 297.
to act in ways that are familiar to them. Charles E. Silberman broadened the scope of contributing forces with his suggestion that what causes the disappointment and anger with our schools "is the fact that recognition of the importance of education has coincided with a profound change in expectations, especially among Negro Americans, but now increasingly among Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans and Indian Americans as well.\textsuperscript{10}

Another possibility yet is that we, the public, are the problem. It is conceivable that the purpose of the school is quite clear and straightforward and that we are the ones who impose additional wishes on the schools which we know are impossible to meet. Stated differently, Lawrence A. Cremin felt that "we have greatly exaggerated the commonness of the common school which has always been essentially a middle-class or upper-class institution."\textsuperscript{11} A real problem with that possibility is the fact that there is now such a great diversification in the backgrounds of those who are in our middle and upper classes that even their purposes and values of education are multi-dimensional.


In a period where there is a general insistence that adults be responsible and productive, the institution designated to provide youth skills and information for adulthood is the school. The public schools are the only resource available for many youth to acquire those requisites. As such, it is critical that public schools demonstrate the flexibility to provide educational experiences and perspectives that will allow its client-groups to become responsible, productive adults.

Organized efforts have been put in place for many years to accommodate America's educational needs. One of those efforts has been the alternative school, which gained national attention during the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Often used interchangeably, alternative schools, alternative programs, and alternative education are all breaks from the traditional method of delivering educational services. Each places a premium on being responsive to the individual needs of students.

An introduction to this study, it is appropriate to examine the major events which led to alternatives and also to attempt to provide clarity to the term "alternative education" for it has been a major force in altering "how" and "what" is taught. Alternatives have also altered how we, as educational professionals, behave.
Events That Prompted Change

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, the schools came under very heavy attack. This attack was due primarily to the fact that this was the period when public schools became central to the individual and the nation's desires to aspire to greater levels. In this introduction, Grant Venn pointed out that "rightly or wrongly, this nation hit upon education as the major social institution to provide solutions to its problems."\(^{12}\)

Why did one of the country's most predictable institutions suddenly find itself bombarded with new missions and heavy criticism? A major catalyst in upsetting the routine of the public schools was the launching of Sputnik. Prior to that launch there existed no need to retain the masses of students for a period that would assure successful high school completion. "Historically, the schools of this nation have had an unstated assignment--to pick out those who should not continue formal schooling."\(^{13}\) This was necessary at the time because the bulk of the labor force's needs were in unskilled activities.

Sputnik signified to a national population a need for

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 12.
the country to enter into a new phase of development. That phase could only be entered by America rapidly developing scientific and technological skills. It also called to the country's attention the fact that "the demands for educated people in the professions, service occupations, management, and engineering exceed(ed) the supply provided by our educational institutions."\(^{14}\)

Sputnik not only called attention to those needs, but in the process of locating and preparing skilled individuals, it also called attention to poverty and discrimination and with them, as Tyler stated, "The uneducated child and the poorly educated child and the poorly educated youth are not promising assets in a modern technological society."\(^{15}\) Sputnik served to "move a host of issues surrounding American education to center stage."\(^{16}\)

The awakening by Sputnik caused Americans to view the 1960's as the era of popular and acceptable criticism of public education. To counter this attack, schools made a hurried effort to upgrade their science, mathematics, and


\(^{15}\)Ibid.

English curricula. Much of those changes were financed by Congress under the 1958 National Defense Education Act. While seeing the upgrading of curricula as the solution to the problems of education, schools were, as Fantini suggested, in fact, "attempting to improve (upon) a uniform nineteenth century institution, whose results could only be an improved outdated institution."17

The need for technically trained young adults continued. While schools attempted to respond in isolation to the need for change, research was being conducted outside of public education by economists and sociologists such as Denison18 and Schultz19 and Gary Becker (1962), Jacob Mincer (1962) and Fritz Machlup (1962). Their theories on the "rate of return on human investment" served to convince economists that the improvements in the quality of human resources "would be one of the major sources of (national) economic growth."20 This data ultimately became a convincing factor in the shaping of


20 Berg, op. cit., p. 9.
national policies and the articulation of the "War on Poverty." Again, the focus of attention shifted to education, but it had become an executive-level priority. This new thrust allowed President Kennedy to give particular attention to programs to remedy the limitations facing the poor and unemployed and formulate the policies designated to "eliminate shortcomings in the educational backgrounds of low-income groups . . . that had to be eliminated in order that the 'other America' might find work in an economy that by 1962 was beginning to quicken its pace."  

The schools came under attack by Congress. A stipulation of the Congressionally-approved Civil Rights Act of 1964 was that federal funds "could not be expended in operations in which there was discrimination on the basis of race."  

The agency given authority to monitor school desegregation was the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. HEW used the "carrot-and-stick" principle to extend desegregation to the classroom. What is significant is the fact that now classrooms as well as schools had to be desegregated in order to assure the district's prompt payments of the federal funds upon which

21 Ibid.

they were quickly becoming dependent for the operation of their new programs. It meant to the classroom teacher, an alteration of teaching socialization skills in heretofore "all white" or "all black" classrooms. The rationale for this classroom desegregation thrust was partly due to the 1966 Coleman Report\textsuperscript{23} which stressed that "individual achievement was dependent on a school's social composition and, furthermore, that a student was influenced by his classmates' social class, background, and aspirations rather than by his race."\textsuperscript{24} While Sexton\textsuperscript{25} questioned Coleman's analysis of his data and Jencks,\textsuperscript{26} very publicly, questioned his conclusions, Coleman's report served as a guiding force in the regrouping of students in the schools and in the classrooms.

Industry also used the 1960's as its time to be critical of the schools. Until that period, the business sector confined its interest in schools to the building facilities, textbooks, and supplies but now the educational


\textsuperscript{24}Rippa, op. cit., p. 343.


boom had created new sales markets.

As the various sectors raised issues concerning the quality and relevancy of curriculum content, "big" business used this period to introduce technology into the schools. By introducing its hardware, industry had created a billion dollar market for itself while simultaneously being seen as having needed educational expertise. Hardware required software and software required curriculum design, all developed by industry at a cost. Industry became very active in other aspects of education. Using their reputation for profitability and bottom-line results, industry moved into aspects of school financing. While some companies were interested in the civic aspect of this endeavor, some saw even further markets yet to be created. They "supported increased financing of schools . . . and . . . decentralizing budget purchase functions in urban schools because of their difficulties in breaking through central bureaucracies." They, in effect, altered established school processes in order to get a better "shot" at the monetary sources.

The last, but not least, important group to be critical of the schools was the parents and students. Parents, especially low-income parents, were historically a non-entity in the formulation of policy and direction of

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27 Sexton, op. cit., p. 17.
the schooling process. The 1960's saw this group mobilizing to assure that their children received the skills that would allow them to become productive citizens in the upcoming era of technology.

In summary, Sputnik triggered unforeseen responses to the American educational enterprise. The magnitude of those responses prompted institutions and individuals to seek methods of transmitting education other than traditional schooling. The climate was right for workable alternatives.

Alternative Education

It seems appropriate at this time to offer a definition of "alternative education." Williams suggests that, "Alternative education is the combination of programs and structures which are substantially differentiated in terms of their objectives, processes, technology, roles and leadership, and are equally accessible to students at no additional cost to them."\(^{28}\) Elaborating on that definition, it is an optional path by which students may receive the knowledge, skills, and credentials necessary for success in their lives. It is a process which attempts to mesh the "ways" one learns with the varieties of

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available teaching styles without stigmas or penalties being imposed on the learner.

Alternative education is used in some circles to define another aspect of schooling, namely, accountability. While one hears about "voucher systems" for educational financing and "performance contracting" to measure results of a student's experiences, this writing is designed to place emphasis on newly instituted programs or courses of study for students, rather than systems of "checks and balances."

Alternative Programs

As stated by Berg, the scientific and technological achievements of Russia, highlighted by the launching of Sputnik, served to bring America's educational deficiencies to "center stage." The late 1950's and early 1960's saw a change in the attitudes of any special interest groups even remotely concerned with the process of education. Industry became actively involved in issues of policy and curriculum. The Federal Government created social programs such as the National Defense Education Act for the purpose of promoting research and innovations in the school curricula. Federal involvement was so broad-based that, as an example, in the State of Tennessee, "eighty-five new professional jobs in the State Department of Education were filled from 1955 to 1964 to handle almost
exclusively federally financed programs."

Monies were plentiful for education during this period. In 1965, Congress appropriated $1.3 billion for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and established "... a record of legislative action in education unparalleled in American History."  

Not only were funds available from federal sources; they were also available from private sources such as educational foundations. Funds were available for research. The Coleman Report, as an example, was a study financed by the Federal Government at a cost of one million dollars. Coleman's study was built around the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision which stated that separate schools for blacks and whites were inherently unequal. In his study, twelve years after the decision, he concluded that public education remained unequal in most areas of the country, especially in those areas where blacks were significant proportions of school populations.

Money was also available for program experimentation. One such endeavor was the development of alternative programs and forms of education in both the public and private sectors.

\[29\] Rippa, op. cit., p. 335.

\[30\] Ibid.
Responding to public discontent with the existing schools, and, to some degree a financial timeliness, parents, teachers, and other concerned persons began to institute "free" or "alternative" schools. Borrowing from the idea that "it is better to ask selected groups of pupils to participate in thoughtful experimental programs than to condemn larger numbers of children in straight-jacketing schools where curricula and methods often have only illusionary test of 'time,'" the alternative schools' founders defined a different set of expectations of their programs. Their educational alternative schools would be "based on the assumption that they were ultimately accountable not to a specific body of knowledge or a set of bureaucratic rules and procedures but to the clients—to the children and parents whom they served." As Riordan defined it, "Their aim was to foster self-respect and a sense of community through processes of shared decision making in which students assumed a major role in determining the nature and direction of their own education." 

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33 Ibid.
Initially, the alternative movement began to get public exposure as a private enterprise. Schools sprang up in store fronts, churches, and even communes. Later, however, as parents, students, and teachers of public schools became knowledgeable of the alternative schools, they began to explore ways in which these same concepts might be applied to public school settings. What they saw and moved to incorporate within their schools was that non-public alternatives made an attempt to set a tone which was "relatively informal, unregimented, nonauthoritarian, (exhibited) person-to-person human relationship, (characterized) by shared decision making, and by respect for an acceptance of a wide range of personal and cultural backgrounds and value systems." These conditions and qualities were within the realm of attainability in the public schools.

Realizing that the public schools are where most students are, alternatives were eventually developed by school districts for all levels of students. The writer will, however, be confining the balance of this introduction to alternatives at the level of the public high school since the study itself centers around secondary school alternatives and students' decisions to attend same.

Gibbons has offered two propositions concerning our

34 Ibid., p. 8.
secondary schools, namely, that:

Secondary education will cultivate gradual transition of students from childhood roles to adult roles by increasing their involvement in adult situations, issues, tasks, and responsibilities.  

Secondary education will improve when the schools use the facilities, services, and personnel of the community.

Not dissimilar, Fantini defines the ingredients of the alternative school as having the capacity to:

Expand the boundaries of schooling to include the community and its resources.

Establish smaller educational units to humanize the experiences for those involved.

Relate educational experiences to the life of the community.

Most alternative public schools do, in fact, attempt to utilize the facilities of the community and to engage students in the adult activities which have a meaning to them.

Alternative School Approaches

Addressing the categorizing of alternative schools across the nation, Smith and Cox note that "their unique

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36 Ibid., p. 65.

37 Fantini, op. cit., p. 122.
local characteristics make systematic assembly of data difficult." Categorizing alternatives is not a tidy and totally clear process, a thing one quickly finds when attempting to neatly distinguish the different features of each program.

Alternatives occur on an "in-class" basis and they occur within schools. Some alternatives are defined as schools-without-walls. The best example of such a school is the Parkway Program in Philadelphia, where classes are taught throughout the city, using the resources of neighboring banks, museums, and service stations as their learning centers.

To distinguish alternatives, the use of Fantini's "alternative approaches" seems to provide distinctions which are rather short and concise. Those approaches which are appropriate at the high school level are:

(1) The traditional approach
(2) The nontraditional and nongraded approach
(3) The talent development approach
(4) The technique (or methodological) approach
(5) The community school approach
(6) The multi-cultural approach
(7) The subcontracted services approach

Traditional

The traditional approach is the more common alternative.


39 Fantini, op. cit., p. 122.
"It is graded and emphasizes the learning of basic skills by cognition." Learning problems are dealt with through additional services offered by the school. The traditional school becomes an option when the public school provides additional alternative programs.

**Nontraditional**

When utilizing the nontraditional approach, the teacher becomes a resource person as opposed to an instructor. "Students activity is in the form of specialized learning projects carried on individually and in small groups."

**Talent Development**

The talent development approach focuses on experiences in a particular field. The school "identifies the learner's talents and orchestrates whatever experiences seem necessary to develop and enhance them."

**Technique**

In contrast to the talent development approach, the technique approach emphasizes the determining of student readiness along predetermined criteria and prescribes remedies to overcome the deficiencies utilizing programmed

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
instructional tools for individual and group activities.

Community School

The community school is designed to serve a variety of needs for a given neighborhood. Perhaps the largest community school network exists in Flint, Michigan, where professional and para-professional personnel provide a variety of services to adults and children within the schools during a 12 to 15 hour operating day.

Multi-Cultural

The multi-cultural approach emphasizes cultural pluralism and ethnic awareness. "Students spend part of each day in racially heterogeneous learning groups. During another part of the day, students and teachers of the same ethnic background meet together . . . all learn the culture, language, customs, history, and heritage of their ethnic groups." \(^{43}\)

Subcontracted Services

Fantini describes the subcontracted services approach as one where "a group of parents, teachers, and students could be delegated authority to operate a particular alternative." \(^{44}\) It could also extend to an outside source

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 123.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
authorized to deliver programs or aspects of the school's curriculum.

**Benefits of Alternatives**

Alternatives offer exciting possibilities to public education. They offer the student the possibility of learning in a style that is consistent with his/her experiences. They offer the teacher the opportunity to perform professionally in a style that is near his/her orientation.

They offer a community variety. As Smith, et al., noted, the optional public school:

1. Provides schools through choice rather than compulsion.
2. Provides ways to make schools responsive to the pluralistic needs of the community.
3. Provides a structure for continued change and renewal.
4. Provides an arena for the trial of new patterns of organization, staffing, and financing.
5. Provides vehicles for the trial of promising concepts in learning and teaching.
6. Provides opportunities for new cooperative relationships among public school systems, teacher education institutions, professional organizations, and governmental agencies.
7. Provides strategies for the decentralization of decision-making control.
(8) Provides an organizational structure that will be more responsive to change and to the needs of the future.

(9) Provides a community forum for the reconsideration of all aspects of education.

(10) Provides opportunities for students and teachers to have more significant roles in determining learning experiences.45

Summary

America's expectations for its educational system have undergone dramatic changes over the last 25 years. Allowed earlier to operate in near isolation, the public schools have since been identified as the institutions best suited to keep the country in the forefront in manpower preparedness and technological advancement. The 1960's saw business and industry and all levels of government join with public education in an attempt to resolve research, personnel, and social issues confronting a rapidly-changing society. A new awareness of education's potential had been internalized and very loudly verbalized.

America's awareness brought with it a wave of criticism about its educational system. Some of that criticism focused on course-content relevancy. The public became vocal because it perceived that education was not

equipping students with the basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to function successfully in this highly competitive and specialized society. The complaints described our schools as training grounds that were unable to adequately prepare students for either institutions of higher learning or for suitable employment.

Another wave of complaints centered around the philosophy and method of operating public schools. During that same time arguments developed which fostered the ideals that a democratic society's hallmark was its ability to develop and utilize options in solving problems of daily living. Those options were already in existence in governments, markets, entertainment, avocational pursuits, media, and education. While options were prevalent in other areas, education was seen as a contradiction to the democratic process; a feeling brought about because there basically were no options offered the majority of students until they completed high school.

Both issues, course-content relevancy and methods of operation of schools, received public attention. To counter the course-content relevancy issue, 1958 became a year in which tremendous amounts of monies were put into the schools by the Federal Government to upgrade students' language, mathematics, and scientific skills. Those monies were earmarked for the expansion of curricula
that would better meet the needs of the changing technology.

To counter the issue of educational philosophy, private, and later public schools developed optional programs that emphasized both the changes in content offerings and the need to acknowledge and work with differences in the learning styles of students.

Today, although talk of alternatives is not as prevalent as in the early 60's and 70's, they continue to grow. "The most comprehensive study of alternative schools recently estimated there may be more than 10,000 alternative schools today, up from only 100 or so in 1970." 46

One of the many reasons for the development of alternative schools in recent years is that they can address the problem of desegregation more readily than traditional schools. As a part of recent settlements in Bakersfield, California; Lima, Ohio; and Cincinnati, Ohio, across-district reassignments to achieve racial parity were not required as the method of achieving desegregation. Instead, voluntary measures, primarily "the establishment of specialty schools--characterized by theme-oriented curricula and voluntary-enrollment

policies—that are intended to draw a diverse group of students from all over the district"\textsuperscript{47} have been approved as acceptable tools for alleviating racial imbalance within the districts.

A study of how a student makes the choice to attend an optional or alternative program may prove to be invaluable to future planning processes in education. As we begin to study the high school completion ratios and vocational readiness of students exposed to options, it may provide an indication of adolescent motivators and may also provide hints as to how the larger society might continuously stimulate youth to meet literacy and technological needs.

The Problem and Purpose of the Study

In altering curricula and responding to the public's outcry for educational reform, public schools began to offer a wider range of options by which students could pursue their K-12 schooling. Those options became known as alternatives and were developed into programs and/or special schools designed to create compatible learning experiences for youth.

Alternative schools and programs have functioned in

the public schools since the late 1960's in significant numbers. Given the span of time and the original intent, which was to motivate students to use the alternative as a less bureaucratic, self-directed process for completing their schooling, one concern at this juncture is what level of student feedback is occurring to suggest whether alternatives are really motivators? Even more basic is the question--what do we as educational planners know about why students opt for the alternatives that we offer? Why would a student pursue a program of study that is nontraditional, that may even be in a different geographical setting than he/she would normally attend? How would the student make that choice? Are there methods or techniques offered to students to allow them to more intelligently choose between options, including the comprehensive program?

Without a sense of why students select alternatives, those new programs designed to attract and retain students and to resolve our ongoing manpower needs may, in fact, still not be reaching the nearly 1 million students who annually drop out of school or remain in school in body only.

This study will explore why high school students in Providence, Rhode Island, made the choice to attend one of the District's magnet programs. Those reasons are of
interest to the researcher because they reflect a decision to:

- attend a school organized and operated with more stricter attendance and classroom requirements than the traditional school.
- in many instances, attend a school away from their junior high school classmates.
- attend a school of farther distance than their originally assigned school.

The Setting for the Study

Prior to desegregation, Providence's three traditional high schools were viewed as ethnically distinct institutions. Hope High, located in the City's East Side, was considered the elite among the traditional schools. Located within a short walking distance of Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design and private schools such as Lincoln and Moses Brown, Hope served a white population of middle to upper-class Jews and WASPs. It also served a mixed minority population; blacks with origins in the Cape Verdean Islands and blacks with long family histories in Rhode Island.

Mount Pleasant High School, located on the City's North Side, sits beside Rhode Island College in a neighborhood which houses many Catholic institutions, among them Providence College, LaSalle Academy High School and Our Lady of Fatima Hospital. The Mt. Pleasant community
consists almost exclusively of upper-middle class Italian and Irish ethnic groups. The few blacks attending Mt. Pleasant lived in the Chad Brown Housing Project, located on the northeastern end of that community.

Central High School is located in the center of the city. Its surrounding communities are almost entirely poorer and first generation Italians from the Federal Hill community and a large number of blacks situated in the city's South Providence community.

"White-flight" of the late 60's and early 70's had its impact on the schools. At that time, while the city's overall white population was 86 percent, Hope's white student population was 65 percent; Mt. Pleasant's was 88 percent, while Central's was 45 percent.

While desegregation served to balance the white/minority population in the schools, it did nothing to impede the continued flight. By 1976, Hope was 35 percent white; Mt. Pleasant was 58 percent white, while Central was 48 percent.

Faced with continued, disproportionate losses of the white population, the Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Jerome B. Jones, secured researchers from the University of Rhode Island along with members of his staff to explore the available literature and devise a plan to impede the high school's negative growth trend.
As a part of that process, the researchers surveyed the community to determine what services would be needed and consistent for Providence, a city historically known for its jewelry manufacturing and textile industries. The 15-year projections obtained by the researchers supported the fact that Providence was fastly moving to a service-oriented community. With that data before them, the researchers presented a study which reflected the need for added manpower in the health, business, legal, and financial industries. Based upon that study, along with other items known to be of interest to the community, the Superintendent recommended, and the Board of Education approved, establishment of the following magnet programs:

- Hope High Arts/Communications
- Central Business/Government and Law
- Mt. Pleasant Health Services/Science

Those programs, funded in large part by a desegregation grant through the Elementary Secondary Education Act, opened their doors in the Fall of 1978. The first year, each program made preparations to enroll up to 100 students. Program administrators were assigned to each school. Resource teachers were attached to each program and given the responsibility of expediting the development of the four-year curriculum. Each program was also given two teachers who were to provide technical instruction and
At each site the administrators were required to establish an advisory committee to the program. That committee was to represent potential employers of students and members of nearby academic institutions offering programs to which the students could ultimately be channelled. While all programs had an open-door policy for entrance, there were dissimilarities to the programs. Those differences centered primarily in expected methods of learning. A few examples of those differences are cited at this time.

**Hope High—Arts/Communications:** Hope, unlike the other programs, required all students to audition in their stated areas of interest. Students were informed that they were expected to perform daily. Reading was to be occasional.

**Central—Government/Law:** Central required interviews. Students were informed that the program required extensive reading, writing, and discussion. Field trips were a frequent occurrence.

**Mt. Pleasant—Health/Science:** Mt. Pleasant required interviews. Expectations were that students would spend the first two years in the classroom/lab setting and the final two in field-based
experiences during the school day.

Significance of the Study

In a profit-oriented environment, organizations almost always devote time and resources to determine the appropriateness of the "product." The more the organization knows concerning why its products sell, the more it can then sharpen its sales appeal and emphasis to capture its segmented market.

While we know that the public school is not profit-centered in the true sense of the term, it does, however, share one characteristic with the corporate world as it relates to new programs and curricula. The common element is that they both need to know the appropriateness of their offerings in the marketplace. The value of this information is that it begins to shed insights as to why students select particular programs and curricula. The fact that the inquiry utilizes a group of students who have made a definite set of choices contrary to traditional programs makes this study of particular significance.

The study has further significance to Providence, Rhode Island, because by virtue of its neighborhood ethnic composition, Providence maintained virtually segregated schools in the 1970's. It was not until 1971 that Providence implemented a desegregation plan at the
elementary school level. The plan, designed to desegregate the junior high/middle schools in 1972-73 and high schools by 1973-74, created a prolonged period of racial tension and resistance by both the adult and the student communities.

While the high school magnet programs were not designed exclusively to eliminate population disparities within the three schools, the white/minority entry rate into the magnet programs more closely resembled the racial goals defined by the school committee than the continued re-adjustments of the District's designed desegregation patterns.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The review of literature concerning the aspects of decision-making is intended to provide a theoretical background and framework by which the decision-making process may be viewed. This review serves to identify existing theories about choice and decision-making by adolescents. It provides the framework necessary for the development of an effective study survey. When combined, the review and the student survey allow one to make further generalizations about adolescent academic decisions. More specifically, those generalizations would focus on how high school students select their particular courses-of-study from among the options offered by their school districts.

The literature review, or search, is organized into three categories. The first, Decision-Making, identifies definitions, elements, and examples of the decision-making process. In addition to its process and value in the academic environment, decision-making is also examined from a theoretical perspective and for its applicability in the business and industrial sectors.

Another category of the review is Adolescent
Decision-Making. This section focuses on how adolescent decisions are influenced. The search identifies some of the important influences in the adolescents' personal and social life as they interact within the home and school communities.

The final category is Alternative Schools and Decision-Making. It concentrates on identifying literature that may shed light on why students select alternative schools and/or alternative programs within schools. It, too, attempts to uncover the significance of parental, peer, and other influences affecting the adolescent's course-of-study choices.

**Decision-Making**

To decide is "to arrive at a solution that ends uncertainty or dispute about,"\(^{48}\) either an issue or a problem. John Arnold defines a decision as "the alternative or solution that best fulfills your purpose."\(^{49}\) Decisions are made whenever there is "any action, response or feeling over which an individual does, or can learn to,

\(^{48}\) *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, (1969), s.v. "Decide."

exercise some control. If there exists a degree of freedom in the words, actions, or emotional responses available, the individual makes a choice"\(^{50}\) or decides.

Making a decision includes, among other items, a consideration of what one personally prizes. "To make an effective decision, you have to know your values."\(^{51}\) In making decisions it is rare for a person to escape the exercising of personal, moral, ethical, and/or humanistic judgments before drawing conclusions. "The presence of values is what distinguishes decision-making from problem-solving."\(^{52}\)

Literature in the field of counseling seems to substantiate the importance of values in the decision-making process. In her counseling efforts, Turner (1979) observes that one of the major reasons that her clients have difficulties reaching career decisions is that they lack an awareness of the relationship between personal values and the careers being explored.

Extending choices for decision-making carries with it


\(^{51}\)Arnold, op. cit., p. 10.

"an obligation to help people to cope with the decisions they face." 53 For that reason, working to provide a clarification of one's values takes on special meaning in the context of counseling. The process centers on helping one to "choose alternatives, internalize values and affirm action on choices." 54

Making a decision is an acquired skill. It requires reasoning and a systematic approach. Turner observes that the second major reason that clients needed assistance in decision-making is that the client "is uninformed about decision-making techniques and doesn't know how to interpret contradictory data relative to the available alternatives." 55

Prior to addressing an approach to decision-making, it appears opportune to offer possible explanations for the absence of decision-making skills in students and other young adults. Some observations reflect a lack of emphasis on decision-making processes in the schools. Watt states that "for many students, career choices are the first time

53 Ibid.
they have been expected to make decisions for themselves which will have an important effect on the kinds of lives they will lead."  

Schools have done little to prepare students to make decisions. "Indeed, far from helping students to learn about decision-making, they often seem to be designed to prevent such learning." Oberhansley expresses a similar reaction when she states that "we can't ask children to play our game for us; we can't do their thinking for them all of their lives; and then, suddenly, when they become 18 years of age, expect them to behave responsibly, making wisely the choices that are so important to them." This holds true at home as well as school.

Lewis offers another perspective which, while limited, has certain validity in defining the reasons why youth are not encouraged to make the appropriate levels of decisions. She feels that the contradiction in "research on adolescent decisions is that the relative inabilities of younger adolescents may be produced by the very legal status that is designated to protect them from

56 Watt, op. cit., p. 48.
57 Ibid.
making decisions."\textsuperscript{59}

Returning to the issue of a systematic approach to decision-making, while not all writers agree on its specific contents the literature tends to define the systematic approach as a four-step process which requires:

(1) Identification of the problem issue  
(2) Defining of alternatives  
(3) Sorting of options  
(4) Choosing or decision-making

It seems appropriate, at this point, to examine those elements of the decision-making process.

\textbf{Identification of the Problem}

Arnold defines this step as "smoking out" the issue. Why is a decision necessary? Hansen (1981) describes the process as one of becoming sensitive or aware. Glatthorn extends the process with the suggestion that "once a problem has been identified, a decision is made about its importance."\textsuperscript{60} The identification process requires one to make a determination of needs, to be clear of what one wants to achieve by the decision to be made and in what priority order.


Define the Alternatives

The literature tends to be somewhat vague in addressing the way one defines alternatives. One must search for possible solutions, defining how the established criteria can be met by using this option. There can be no decision-making in its true sense say Hansen, "if there are no alternatives from which to choose." 61

Sort Out the Options

"If we learn to generate alternatives rather than accept the obvious choices, then we may be able to find choices that are more satisfying to us." 62 Of particular value is the need for one to weigh the significance of each alternative. Is the choice going to benefit me over the long period or is it simply for immediate resolution with repercussions to follow? Hart feels that a choice of an alternative, especially in the decision-making process of adolescents, is "based solely on the immediate or short-term consequences." 63 The writer feels, as does Hansen, that "education has a responsibility to assist individuals to consider situations and dilemmas in the light of the

61 Hansen, op. cit., p. 411.
63 Ibid., p. 55.
information available and the internalized value system that one holds." According to Nelson, "It is at this point that awareness occurs," according to Nelson. In achieving awareness, "one must confront an issue with pre-determined commitment that an agonizing process of rationalization must occur, that a position must be taken."

Make the Decision

Making the decision requires that one choose a course of action and pursue it with an awareness of its risks. It is important, at this point, that one "accept the consequences and the responsibility for the choice." Decision-making includes the uses of strategies and trade-offs necessary for implementing the action. It requires trouble-shooting and after a period, the ability to re-evaluate the decision. "In the end, the best way to learn about decision-making is to practice it."

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64 Hansen, op. cit., p. 412.
65 Nelson focuses on the concept of "choice awareness" in assisting clients. He states that, "awareness is an outgrowth of learning about choices; that it emerges and is nurtured as one comes to understand some of its implications and consequences of their past behavior and as they increase in alternatives in making both present and future choices." Nelson, op. cit., p. 463.
66 Hansen, op. cit., p. 413.
67 Ibid.
68 Watt, op. cit., p. 48.
There are many articles and documents available that address decision-making. Most of those reviewed, however, are limited to strategies as opposed to the theoretical processes for decision-making.

In addition to the process, certain analytical skills are necessary for making decisions. Those skills, according to Cooper, are:

1. Frame-of-Reference Facility
2. Association Perception
3. Sequential Perception
4. Elaboration
5. Generalizing
6. Symbolizing
7. Organization
8. Strategic Sensing
9. Goal-Mindedness
10. Objectivity and Skepticism

At this point, Arnold offers some cautions to the decision-maker. They are:

- A decision that reflects only logic may fail if those on whom its success depends reject it for emotional reasons.

- Wishful thinking has no place in decision-making. Positive thinking does, if you don't let it blind you to reality.

- Common sense usually produces decisions to do the obvious.

At certain times, even armed with the best process

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69 Cooper, op. cit., p. 206.
71 Ibid., p. 18.
72 Ibid., p. 20.
and skills, the situation is the most critical consideration in the decision-making process. As an example, those in policy-making positions in participatory work environments, executives with organization-wide responsibilities, refrain from participating in operational decisions. While they may establish the policy to initiate an activity, their management philosophy precludes the direct involvement in the development of options. "When broad decisions are made (in this type of environment), a pyramiding reaction sets in, for subsidiary decisions of all kinds must be made." 73 Middle management may be assigned the leadership responsibility for developing procedures which reflect the parameters of time and cost. In the end, a supervisor may be instructed to "select that course of action which is expected to yield the greatest return for the least commitment of expenditure." 74

In a similar fashion, the decision of a school board to introduce foreign language electives as exploratory courses at a given grade level creates the same pyramiding effect. Expected in that decision is that administrators will assemble the appropriate personnel to develop the curricula that will serve as the guide which, when implemented by the teacher, will produce foreign language

73 Cooper, op. cit., p. 9.
74 Ibid., p. 59.
options and the intended exposure for students. It would be demoralizing, in this instance, if a board member, even with outstanding technical skills, became involved in the subordinated decisions that followed.

**Adolescent Decision-Making**

To now, the purpose has been to define decision-making in its broadest terms. It now seems in order to look at how adolescents arrive at decisions. The first part of this section focuses on adolescent decisions about issues other than school. The second part addresses items that are strictly school-related such as course selection and career planning.

**General Decision-Making**

Are adolescents influenced by others in their decisions? According to Hart, "to expect adolescents to make completely free decisions would be unrealistic." He sees that age group as being both emotionally and financially dependent on others, especially parents, and attempts to help them to better understand and to cope with this dependency.

Studies were designed to determine who, parent or peer, had the greatest effect on adolescent decision-making.

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75 Hart, op. cit., p. 57.
Coleman (1963) and Green (1972) were of the belief that peer influence was dominant while Bandura (1972) concluded that it was the parent. The research by Sebald and White (1980) refutes the parent vs. peer, one-or-the-other argument. "Teenagers do not align with either parents or peers as exclusive reference groups. They take their cues selectively, depending on the problem they confront."  

These conclusions were based on similar studies conducted in 1960 and 1976 in Hilliard, Ohio, and Scottsdale, Arizona. The communities involved were felt to be similar in many respects; among them, both are almost all white and viewed as relatively conservative. The study points out that while there was a greater shift toward peer orientation in 1976 as compared to 1960, those areas where students tended to consult parents stayed intact. The students continued to ask for assistance from parents on issues of money, college, and career plans, while consulting peers on matters of dating and sex, clubs and social events, and out-of-school literature and magazines.

Gifford and Colston (1975) also conducted a study of peer group influences. Its purpose was "to evaluate the effect of group influence on decisions made by secondary school students as they were in face-to-face contact with

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Twenty-eight classes (366 students) in grades eight and eleven participated in the study. They represented a consolidated school district, a county unit, and a municipal district. The conclusions drawn from this study suggest that:

1. Secondary students are significantly affected by peer group pressure when there is a group vs. one, or group vs. two situation.

2. The subjects representing the group classed as leaders remained more independent under group pressure than did non-leaders.

3. There was no significant difference in responses of male vs. female under group pressure.

4. Urban subjects showed significantly more independence than rural groups under pressure.

While the literature to this point recognizes parents and peers as influencers of adolescent decisions, there is a third influencer, values, both individual and group. Joseph D. Noshpitz, Director of the Clinical Institute, Washington, D.C., suggests that the adolescent is definitely influenced in decision-making by the group. He sees the type of decision being affected by consistency


78 Ibid., pp. 371-372.
(stability vs. shifting) of the chosen peer group and ultimately, the adolescent.

A recent study of adolescents and sex-related decisions by Anne Jushasz and Mary Sonnenshein-Schneider (1980) seems to reinforce the thought that the ability to master the decision-making process coupled with one's personal values form the most significant factors in the adolescent's decisions about sex. The report, "Adolescent Sexual Decision-Making," contends also that the availability of information is critical for responsible sexual decision-making. The need for information is further supported by Barbara Ungar in her article "Helping Adolescents Learn to Make Personal Decisions."

In-School Decision-Making

Marilyn Macchia, who is Chairman of Career Programs for Mamaroneck, New York, reports on the frustrations of students because of their perceived inability to participate in certain decisions which have a direct impact on them in the schools. She observes that "student dissatisfaction has come about because the student has become a victim. He is rarely the subject or agent, but often the object of activities." 

While Macchia's writing is concerned with furthering career education, it has to raise questions about how decisions are made in schools. While those questions may prove to be worthy of further research, the basic issue continues to be what, or who, affects the in-school decisions of adolescents?

Throughout the literature, it appears that five major factors greatly influence adolescent decision-making in the schools. They are:

(1) The family
(2) The counselor/teacher
(3) Peers
(4) The awareness/informational activities provided
(5) The student's value system.

Literature on the family's influence tends to re-emphasize the parental importance to adolescents making choices. In a study by Goodale and Hall (1976), work values and parental influences were examined as mediators of the relationship between social origin and plans for college and career of 437 high school sophomores. Their findings revealed that student perceptions of parents' interest in their work does, in effect, serve as an important indicator as to whether those students will attend college.
In a study conducted by C.K. Mondart (1970), designed to identify the occupational aspirations and expectations of 13,600 high school students in Louisiana, the findings revealed that those aspirations, while not always realistic, are influenced most by the home. It is worthwhile also to note again that one of the recommendations from the study is that the schools provide early, organized and realistic information about career opportunities.

The combination of (1) the family and (2) the need for information occur in another writing. Woal (1977), as did Mondart, sees the extended family as the greatest influencer of choice on students. Data from his research causes him, also, to observe that "... some provision must be made to include parents in the educational process since they are the major influencers of vocational choice at this time."\(^8^0\) Prior to those comments, Woal noted that his findings raise some very legitimate questions about information, among them, "Should the school make available programs of information in the area of career development for the family group?"\(^8^1\)

Literature on in-school decisions reveals a heavy


\(^8^1\) Ibid., p. 6.
connection between career and curriculum choices. This may be due in part to an observation by Macchia that "students wish to relate to reality; occupations and the training they require are real and necessary."\(^{82}\)

Mondart recognized the powerful influence of peers, or friends, in the student's decision-making about schools. The peer group has also been acknowledged and accented on the adolescent's out-of-school decisions. Whether that peer group is the most important social unit to the adolescent is still debatable. What is safe to say is that high school students do look "to their friends for the development of attitudes toward school and standards of acceptable behavior."\(^{83}\)

Damico's research attempted to determine whether peer pressure influences affected the achievement of students. Testing 90 members of the ninth grade class in a university laboratory school in Florida, it appears, from the broad scope of issues which she chose to include (racial participation, number of established cliques, number of new students to the class, etc.), that the only clear-cut conclusion reached supports the view that "students are led to achieve only when their peers provide support for

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\(^{82}\) Macchia, op. cit., p. 7.

Another study seems to support the importance of peer effects on achievement. McDill, Meyer, and Rigsby (1967) found that academic behavior is strongly affected by peer pressure. They found that in the schools where students and teachers value achievement, students achieve at higher levels than do students in schools where this does not exist.

Of the literature reviewed, certain portions included the role of teacher/counselors in adolescent decision-making about school-related issues. The study by Woal (1977) revealed that "the teacher and counselors representing the schools are relatively minor influences in career development opportunities and that only 9 percent of the students in 8th grade (up to 20 percent in 11th grade) had any sustained contact with teachers and counselors in connection with career interest and jobs."  

Similar findings occurred in a study of the effectiveness of counselors vs. computers in helping course selection. Gary E. Price reports that his opportunity to conduct such an evaluation occurred in an Illinois high school with students in grades 10-12 during the school year 1970-71. His findings were that "students who

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84 Ibid., p. 90.

85 Woal, op. cit., p. 6.
selected courses with the assistance of the computer received on the average as high grades and made no more course changes than did those students who selected their courses in a 30 minute individual counseling session with their counselor."\(^{86}\) Price concludes that the role of the counselor is minimum as it relates to student decisions. One of his conclusions is that "many of the information-disseminating tasks that counselors do may be done as effectively by computer programs."\(^{87}\)

Although the level of influence by in-school personnel may come as no surprise, Mary C. Kohler (1981) attempts to explain its reasons. She maintains that if youth are to become involved in directing their education, then teachers must become more facilitative. She later says that if young people are to participate, teachers "... must create an environment of trust in which pupils are not afraid to exert themselves."\(^{88}\) "Obviously," she continues, "this is possible only when the adults involved have faith that youngsters can make good decisions and carry them out responsibly."\(^{89}\)


\(^{87}\)Ibid.


\(^{89}\)Ibid.
While this literature review was not intended to delve into the cause for teachers' low status in adolescent decision-making, one must begin to wonder whether there is a relationship between students' lack of dependence on their teachers for decisions and Lumley's (1979) feelings of teacher powerlessness in the decision-making process at the building level. Lumley's article addresses the frustrations expressed by teachers due to their inability to participate in the decision-making processes which govern both their instructional responsibilities and the facilities in which they work. In the article, the principal is seen as the authoritarian figure who allows the minimum response from the subordinate, or teacher, as to the direction of the educational program. Alone, this article seems unrelated to the review. It causes the writer to wonder whether in the student-teacher relationship, the teacher is guilty of conveying that same authoritative, all-knowing image to the students. If so, could this be a reason why students are less likely to share their problems with the teacher and less likely to involve them in their personal and educational decision-making.

Alternative Schools and Decision-Making

The next issue pursued in the review was, "How do
students make alternative decisions?"

According to Glatthorn, "One of the reasons many students opt for alternative schools is a determination to find a better way of making decisions for themselves and their schools."\(^\text{90}\) An example of one school where the element of choice has brought a degree of involvement and curriculum relevancy, utilizing a minimum of resources, has been Santa Maria High School, Santa Maria, California. It adopted the school-within-school concept as its model for offering students options. Students at Santa Maria spend a year in an entry program designed for them to meet their State-required basic skills component. After that period, the student then chooses between the School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) and the School of Applied Arts (SAA) for grades 10-12. The distinction and decision for the students is as follows: "In choosing to be affiliated with SAA, students have chosen practical training for a career they will enter after graduation. By contrast, all students enrolled in SAS have declared they wish to continue schooling for four or more years after high school graduation."\(^\text{91}\) The significance of this

\(^{90}\) Glatthorn, op. cit., p. 110.

example is not in the choice of options, but rather the fact that students have to make certain curriculum decisions prior to entering the 9th grade of high school.

In describing feedback he has received about alternatives, Vernon Smith notes that "the atmosphere of schools is distinctly different. Students and teachers feel better about attending a school they have chosen." 92

It seems from the readings that one of the major salient features of alternatives is the participatory decision-making feature as opposed to specific choices from among a variety of curriculum options. Another feature is that they provide local control for parents and students and for teachers and administrators at a time when federal and state control through legislatures and the courts is on the rise. 93

Somewhat akin to the views of Smith, Barr sees the existence of alternatives, not as a choice of curriculum, but somewhat a state-of-mind when he expresses, "It is also possible to view alternative schools as a competitive

93Ibid.
response to urban decline.\textsuperscript{94}

Summary

The review of the literature was undertaken for the purpose of determining what writers and researchers have discovered concerning the decision-making processes of adolescents. It specifically sought to uncover data in three categories:

(1) What is the decision-making process?
(2) What factors affect adolescents' in-school and out-of-school decisions?
(3) How do adolescents make curriculum choices?

Findings

Decision-making is a four-step process which requires one to:

(1) Identify the issue or problem
(2) Define the alternatives
(3) Sort out the options
(4) Make a choice.

Present in that process is an awareness and a response to one's personal values.

In addition to incorporating one's values into the decision-making, it is also necessary that one have certain analytical skills that are necessary for data

discrimination. Those skills include objectivity and goal-mindedness.

Adolescents are greatly influenced in their decision-making. Parents and peers are the greatest influences, while school personnel play a surprisingly lesser role, especially in career decisions. Another influence is the availability of data by which adolescents can formulate options. It is worth noting that in schools where value is placed on achievement by peers and teachers, the level of achievement is higher than in schools where these pressures do not exist.

A final point about alternatives: The issue of decisions about alternative programs seems to center around whether one does or does not choose to attend the alternative. There was very little literature uncovered which would allow one to formulate opinions as to why a student chose a given course of study, especially when multiple-options were available.

The findings from the literature review leave a lot of unanswered questions about students' reasons for attending alternative schools. A few of those questions are:

(1) Do factors other than curricula/program affect students' choices?

(2) To what extent were students offered counseling as a means of providing an
awareness of the alternative programs in the high schools?

(3) Did parents and siblings aid and/or sanction students' choices?

These issues represent the major focus of this study.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Based upon the results of the literature review (Chapter II), it seemed that there was not an abundance of available data identifying students' reasons for school/curricula choices. It also seemed that the best way to obtain those reasons was to design a study to elicit students' explanations for educational decisions. To achieve this end, a questionnaire was developed to make inquiry into the rationale for choices made by students.

Deciding on the Instrument

While the literature identified three groups that have an impact on adolescents' decision-making (peers, parents, and school personnel), the literature fell short in providing a real sense of how each group was helpful to the adolescent. Also missing was an indication of whether students entered alternatives with career decisions made; whether there was the presence or absence of teacher and counselor support; whether the school's reputation played a role in their decision; and, in general, a number of other questions yet resolved which could prove useful in determining what could entice students to maximize their educational opportunities.
In addition to there being limited research on the above, there was limited research to explain why students in a given program chose to attend that program. There was also limited research to allow one to conclude that having experienced a given program, it offered what the student expected.

The researcher made the decision to use a questionnaire as the method for gathering data for the study. While recognizing certain limitations to this method of data collection, the researcher saw this method as being the most efficient and effective means of acquiring data given the time restrictions imposed by the District.

**Pre-Testing the Questions**

Once the draft questionnaire was developed, it was pre-tested with a class of 9th grade students at Montgomery Village High School in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Many of those students, especially the minority students, were recent enrollees in the Montgomery County Schools who moved from urban settings such as Providence because of parental employment transfers and relocation.

The students were given basic information on the attempted research effort and a very general description of the characteristics and programs in existence in the Providence, Rhode Island, schools. They were then asked
to read the proposed questions and comment as to whether the questions were understood. If a student asked what a specific question meant, the tester made inquiry to determine how many students had a problem understanding that question. The tester then answered the students' questions, noting the number of students experiencing difficulty in understanding. When 20 percent of the class expressed such difficulty, the tester rephrased the question and once again sought to determine whether it was understood by the students. Once the necessary corrections were made, the questions to be used were then organized.

Organizing the Questions

The first section of the survey addressed demographics. After looking at basic demographics, the questions then began to address the study's primary intent, namely, to gather data about two major issues: (a) students' introductions to magnet programs and (b) factors influencing their decision to attend programs. More specifically, it set out to get an understanding of the following:

1. Which vehicles provided effective magnet program exposure.
2. The effect of parents on enrollees' decisions.
3. Whether counselors/teachers had an effect on enrollees' decisions.
(4) The extent of sibling/peer influence on enrollees' decisions.

(5) Any other patterns that would shed light on this group's decisions about school choice.

Testing for Validity and Reliability

As a means of assuring a valid survey instrument, the researcher, as noted earlier, pre-tested the questionnaire with a group of 9th graders at a time when they, like the survey group, had made their high school selections. The dialogue that followed provided the researcher with a level of confidence that the students understood the survey's intent and the questions developed. Students were asked, a final time, to review the questions, this time factoring in all of the background and information provided to see if any question could be stated more simply or directly.

The researcher undertook a series of steps in an attempt to create a reliable survey. The first was to develop the introduction to the survey. Each administrator read the same introduction and instructions to the students exactly as they were written. The instructions and introduction closely approximated the introduction which the students had at the beginning of their own survey instruments.

The research was also conducted at each school on
the same date within the same time period. This meant that each class of students had the same time experience within the program, no matter the school attended, i.e., freshmen were all in program attendance for eight months; second year program students, one year and eight months; third year students, two years and eight months.

As a final attempt to acknowledge any irregularities, the responses were organized by class and school, and analyzed to determine whether noticeably different results were occurring within any one class or school.

**Finalizing the Questionnaire**

Once the level of importance and effect of each question was determined, the tester added in students' comments and the revised questionnaire was developed. It was then shared with Providence alternative program administrators for comment. This process was included because, in addition to administrative duties, they also served as counselors for their students and could provide insight into the relevance of the questions. They could also provide insight about whether a question's length or phrasing would cause students to "tune-out" the exercise. After obtaining the administrators' feedback, the final questionnaire was developed.
Selecting the Sample

The decision as to which students to sample was based upon some very practical issues, namely:

- When a representative number of all magnet school students would be in attendance in a magnet program class.

- When those students would be in a magnet program class that best typified the student making the more recent choice to attend the program.

- When those same students would be in classes that were either being conducted by the administrator or a teacher whom the administrator felt was interested in obtaining the interpreted data for program recruitment and/or improvement purposes.

Given the fact that all of the programs were organized and scheduled in a similar manner throughout the District, the tester and the program administrators were able to review the program schedule, period-by-period, to determine which class period best satisfied the sampling needs.

It was decided that the sample would be those students who comprised the second period of the class day. One reason for the decision was that the second period was a time when there were approximately 125 students in attendance in the programs. Of those 125 students, only one was a senior, meaning the objective of reaching more recent enrollees could also be achieved. The 125 students also represented a reasonable sample when examining the Providence magnet programs. That figure
represented 15 percent of the total program enrollees. Taking into consideration the fact that some students would not complete the entire questionnaire, the 125 potential sample would at worse be reduced to 12 percent of all enrollees.

On the date that the survey was administered, 115 of the 125 projected students were in attendance. Table 1, as illustrated, provides a breakdown of the 115 students by class status.

Table 1

Breakdown of Student Sample Group by Class Status (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

115 100.0

*The senior participating in the survey was an individual slated to repeat the 12th grade. In later tallies involving class, he will be included as a junior.

The largest group in attendance at the time of the survey was identified as freshmen. Freshmen totalled
54/47 percent of the sample, with juniors serving as the next largest number with 35/30.4 percent. The two combined accounted for 77 percent of those sampled.

Table 2

Student Sample Group by Years Attending A Magnet Program (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another factor to be mentioned about the sample is its racial and sexual composition vs. the total magnet program population.

The Providence School Department, in its initial development of magnet programs, established that the programs could closely approximate the city-wide high school racial goals of 38.5 percent minority students. The overall magnet program statistics, as reported to the Board during the month of May of the survey year, were minority 39.3 percent vs. white 60.7 percent; male 44.7 percent vs. 55.3 percent female. The survey group
closely approximated both the city-wide goals and program's statistics. The combined totals of the survey group were 43 minorities, 37.4 percent and 48, 41.7 percent male.

**Administering the Questionnaire**

Selected teachers and program administrators with program teaching assignments received written instructions (Appendix A) and a set of questionnaires (Appendix B) which were given to their students during the second period of a specified date. That date and time frame were the same for all classes. Teachers allowed 20 minutes for the completion of the questionnaire. To facilitate a response to the survey, students were informed that the survey was aimed at overall program improvement. It would not be seen as a reflection of their worthiness to continue. The students were also informed that the teacher would not be responsible for compiling and analyzing the data but would only forward it along with the survey from students in other programs to a central point for compilation. Again, what was hoped was that students would perceive a genuine need for data to improve the program rather than the questioning of their individual motives.

Finally, a short note was attached to each questionnaire expressing appreciation for their participation in the survey and the fact that the data was to be used in a
context larger than that of the Providence School Department.

Analyzing the Data

The first step in analyzing the survey data was to total the responses to each question. Responses to each question were recorded by raw numbers and percentages. This method appeared to be the most effective way to view and to report the data.

After obtaining item-by-item responses, the questions and responses were then organized into two major categories, namely:

A. Demographic Information

B. Influencers in Students' Decision-Making
   a. parents
   b. counselors/teachers
   c. siblings/peers
   d. other

Once this data was recorded, the researcher further examined the data to determine whether there were interactions within the various sub-samples.

Limitations of the Study

To be certain that the contents of this study are properly viewed, the following limitations must be noted:

(1) The study was restricted to the Providence, Rhode Island, School Department student population.
(2) Students interviewed were those who had made particular curriculum and school choices, namely, to attend one of the five magnet programs that were scattered throughout the District.

(3) The study was conducted primarily through the use of questionnaires. Those questions were designed to seek student self-perceptions of why they chose to attend the magnet programs.

(4) The study did not address why students not participating in magnets did not choose to attend the programs.

(5) The study was restricted to students at grade levels 9-12, who remain in the magnet programs.

(6) The study was influenced by the types and numbers of alternative programs offered.

(7) The study did not attempt to elicit information from parents, teachers, friends, or other potential student influencers.
CHAPTER IV
DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter will report the data from the questionnaire in the following fashion:

(1) A school-by-school comparison of student assignment patterns.

(2) A report of those factors stated by students as being most effective in their exposure to magnet programs.

(3) A report on the extent to which students identified parents, teachers, counselors, peers, and other adults as being influencers in their decisions to attend magnet programs. Data will be reported by influencer and by selected sub-groups within each of the influencers.

Background

On June 9, 1982, the Magnet Program Survey was administered at each of the three Providence, Rhode Island, high schools housing magnet alternative programs. Mr. John Silvia, Lead Teacher of Government and Law, Central High School, administered the survey to 38 students. Ms. Ann Colannino, Lead Teacher of Arts and Communication, Hope High School, administered the survey to 29 students, while Ms. Bennie Fleming, Assistant Principal of Health and Science Programs, administered the survey to 48 students.

Each person designated the first twenty minutes of
their second period as the time to ask students to complete the questionnaire which sought answers about those factors influencing their decisions to attend magnet programs. One-hundred-and-fifteen (115) students responded to the survey.

Assignment Patterns

One section of the survey addressed demographics. Questions were included in that section in order to examine normal vs. magnet assignment patterns. The information shows shifts in two of the three schools surveyed. Those shifts are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Magnet School Choices Compared with the Student's Normal Feeder Pattern Assignment (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal Assignment</th>
<th>Central (61)</th>
<th>Hope (30)</th>
<th>Mt. Pleasant (24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central 38</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope 29</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt. Pleasant 48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty-one students questioned would have attended Central High School as opposed to the 38 enrolled.
Mt. Pleasant, conversely, experienced a 100 percent gain of sampled students by virtue of the figures reflecting 24 normal assignments as opposed to 48 enrolled in Mt. Pleasant's program. Only Hope remained consistent with 29 magnet students vs. 30 normally slated to attend.

The data analysis section first reports the general demographics of the students surveyed. Included in that information is an examination of the normal vs. magnet program assignment patterns. This section is followed by a report of how students became aware of the various programs. The section then reports the impact of the following on the students' program choices:

- Parents
- Counselors/Teachers
- Siblings/Peers

One of the questions asked early in the survey was, "Is this the high school you originally wanted to attend?" Twenty-eight students (24.3 percent of the survey group) stated in the demographics that the school now attended was not the one that they originally wanted to attend. By entering a magnet program, these students could attend any school of their choice. The data in Table 3 suggests that the perceived desirability of the school as a whole rather than the magnet in particular may have had a strong influence on their decisions.
Initial Program Exposure

To determine initial awareness to the magnet program, students were asked to identify what most accurately described how they became aware of the magnet programs offered at the three high schools.

Table 4
Total Group Response to the Vehicles Providing Their Initial Exposure to the Program (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vehicle</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Personnel (Staff)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies/Activities</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>35.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnet Program Students</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>115</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 reveals, school personnel and/or activities created the greatest exposure to the various programs. Forty-six (46) cited "counselors/teachers," while 41 identified the magnet program assemblies held at their school (middle or junior high) as making them aware of their alternatives. Combined, these two groups accounted
for exposing 75.7 percent to the magnets.

School activities accounted for an even larger percentage of student exposure. Of the 23 (20 percent) additional students identifying "students/friends" as their source of exposure, all but three acknowledged that students currently in the magnet programs provided them with dialogue or information about the magnet programs which was helpful in their decision to attend.

Of the remaining responses, two credited siblings and three credited parents for providing their initial exposure.

Parents

The literature review indicated that to varying degrees the four groups most influential in students' school decisions are parents, counselors, teachers, and peers. The first of that group to be addressed is parents.

The survey set out to determine what role, if any, Providence parents played in the enrollees' decisions to attend the magnet programs. To begin this inquiry, students were asked whether their parents were in agreement with their high school selection.

As Table 5 indicates, at least 86 percent of the surveyed group's parents were in agreement with their students' school choice. As is also indicated, nearly 85
percent of these parents were in agreement with their students' program choices.

To determine whether there was a relationship between parental influence and their desires that their children attend a school because they (the parents) had attended that school, the question was asked, "Did either parent/guardian attend this high school?" Only 29 (25.2 percent) responded "yes" to this question.

As indicated in Table 6, 23 of 29 students (79 percent) originally wanted to attend their current school. That figure nearly equals the total group's response (87/115=76 percent).

Parental agreement of the 29 parents nearly paralleled the findings of the larger group.
Table 6

Responses of Students Whose Parents Attended the Student's Current School (N=29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Was this the school the student wanted to attend?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>NO RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Were parents in agreement with school selection?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>NO RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Were parents in agreement with program selection?</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>NO RESPONSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 illustrates that the total group's parents and the 29 parents who had attended the same high school both approved the students' school and program choices in nearly 85 percent of both group's responses.

Closely related to school choice and parental influence is the specific program selected and input from parents. Students were asked whether talks with parents/guardians and other adults (non-school personnel) were instrumental in their decision to attend their respective programs. Eighty-four (73.0 percent) responded "yes," while 28 (24.3 percent) said "no."
Table 7
Comparison of Responses of Parental Agreement to High School and Program Selection: 29 Parents Who Attended Same School as Their Child vs. Total Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>29 Parents</th>
<th>115 Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Parents were in agreement</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with school selection.</td>
<td>82.8%</td>
<td>87.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Parents were in agreement</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with program selection.</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
<td>84.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Counselors/Teachers

Each magnet program centers around a vocational/avocational theme. As previously stated, when students were asked how they became aware of the magnet programs, 41 (46 percent) stated that awareness was a result of the combined category "counselor/teacher." When asked whether their last school provided career counseling, 53 (46.1 percent) responded "yes." While that response was less than 50 percent, 83 (74.1 percent) did acknowledge that their former school's guidance programs were helpful in their decision.

An additional question was added to the survey in order to separate and be more specific about the influence of each, the teacher and the counselor, on the decision-making process. When asked whether teachers from their
Table 8

Class-By-Class Positive Responses to the Effectiveness of Guidance Activities in Helping Students to Make Program Selections (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>No. (Total)</th>
<th>No. &quot;Yes&quot; Responses</th>
<th>% &quot;Yes&quot; Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh.</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>75.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soph.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jr.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>69.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>73.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

last school helped to select their magnet programs, only 32 (27.8 percent) responded affirmatively.

Table 9 looks more closely at the 83 students not helped by teachers. The researcher found that students most frequently identified counselors and assemblies as the vehicles most responsible for making them aware of the magnet programs.

According to the responses of the non-teacher assisted students, counselors and assemblies were nearly equal in providing program awareness. Combined they were the awareness vehicles for 72 percent of the group. What is unknown is whether counselors did or did not encourage students to attend the magnet program assemblies.
Table 9

Responses to How Students Receiving No Assistance from Teachers Became Aware of the Magnet Programs (N=83)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Awareness Vehicle</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Counselors</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Magnet Program Assemblies</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Students/Friends</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. No Response/Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a closer examination of those 83 students who stated that their teachers played no role in their decision, 60 (72.3 percent) acknowledged that parents and/or other adults were influencers in their decisions to attend the magnet program.

**Siblings/Peers**

The next group of findings to be reported addresses the students' siblings and peers.

Students were divided on their response to the question, "Did older siblings or friends offer advice as to which high school to attend?" Fifty-two (42.2 percent) responded "yes"; 63 (54.8 percent) answered "no."

Students were then asked to identify whether their
peers influenced their school decisions. As reported,

Table 10

Peers as Influencers of School Choices (N=115)

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peers Influenced School Decisions</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

71 responded that their classmates definitely influenced their decisions. Seventy-six (66.1 percent) stated that students currently in magnet programs did influence their decisions as a result of magnet student-presented assemblies, informal conversations at both the junior and senior high schools and in other conversations held away from the school.

The response was very much the same with those students identified earlier as receiving no help from their teachers in making their decision (Table 11).

Other

Another set of questions was added to the survey in order to obtain data relative to other factors influencing students' decisions.

One factor examined was whether responses would differ
Table 11

A Comparison of the Influence of Peers and Magnet Program Students on Decisions to Attend the Magnet: Total Group Versus Those Receiving No Assistance from Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Classmates as Influencers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students (N=115)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Teacher Assisted Students (N=83)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Magnet Program Students as Influencers</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students (N=115)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Teacher Assisted Students (N=83)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

between students who had made their career choices versus those who had not made a choice. The most striking finding was that 96/83.5 percent of the students who chose the program had made career choices. Table 12 examines the responses of the 96 students who had made career choices.

Of the students who made career choices, 68 (70.8 percent) stated that the program offered courses and experiences as expected. Of the 19 students who had not made career choices, nine (47.4 percent) stated "no," while five (26.3 percent) provided no response. Only five (26.3 percent) noted that the program did offer the types of courses
Table 12

For Students Having Made Career Choices, How Were They Made Aware of the Program; the Effectiveness of Guidance Services on the Decision; and Whether the Program Meets Their Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Have Made Career Choices (N=96)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Program awareness was gained via:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. counselors/teachers</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. students/friends</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. magnet program assemblies</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. other (to include parents/siblings)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Were guidance services helpful to decision-making?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. yes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. no</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Does the program offer courses and experience as expected?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. yes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. no</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and experiences that they expected prior to entering the program.
While acknowledging that the courses and experiences were not as expected, 68 percent of those who made career decisions said that they would remain with the program while four (44.4 percent) of nine not making career decisions acknowledged that they would return.

Students were asked whether elements of the high schools' reputation contributed to their decisions. Those elements and responses are illustrated in Table 13.

Table 13
Identification of Elements of the School's Reputation and Students' Responses to Relevancy in Their School Decision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Responses to Each Element (N=115)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes N/%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. School's overall reputation</td>
<td>64/55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Principal/faculty reputation</td>
<td>54/47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sports/extracurricular activities</td>
<td>56/48.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty-four students cited the school's reputation as an influencer on their decision. Of that group, 45 (70.3 percent) acknowledged that their classmates were instrumental in their decision. This is slightly higher than the overall group's reaction to their classmates influence
The final item on the survey was an open-ended question. It asked students to make suggestions as to what should be done to attract more students into the program. The comments touched upon all aspects of the program. Some of those mentioned by one or two students were:

"Increased classtime"
"More lab and research work"
"More extracurricular activities"
"Improve the school's reputation"
"Inform students of genuine opportunities for theatre roles"
"Stop changing programs"
"Classes need to be more interesting"
"Have a summer school"
"Less homework"
"More electives"
"Make the program easier"
"Separate classes by career goals"
"More speakers"

The most frequent suggestions given were:

- More field trips (9)
- Demonstrate interesting aspects of the programs to middle school students (9)
- More advertisement plus publicize what goes on in the program (10)
While the responses were all encompassing, it appears that advertisement and demonstrations (19 responses) were defined most frequently as ways to attract potential students.

**Summary**

On June 9, 1982, the Magnet Program Survey was administered to 115 students at three Providence, Rhode Island, high schools. Their class status is detailed in Table 14.

**Table 14**

Class Standing of Survey Respondents (N=115)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>No./Percent (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen</td>
<td>54/47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomores</td>
<td>35/30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniors</td>
<td>25/21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>1/ 0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The primary intent of the study was to examine two major issues, namely:

(1) What methods are used effectively to expose students to alternatives; and
(2) Who influences students' decisions to attend the programs?

In reviewing the pupil assignment pattern, Central, the oldest of the schools, lost 23 of its regularly assigned students to other programs. Mt. Pleasant, the newest facility, gained 24, a gain of 100 percent of those originally assigned there.

Seventy-five percent of the students sampled credited school personnel or orientations with providing their initial awareness while nearly 20 percent identified students currently enrolled in the programs as the source of their awareness. Parents and siblings were credited with providing initial awareness in only five instances.

There were 28 students who attended programs at schools not initially their first choice of high schools. They became aware of the magnet programs through two primary sources—their counselors and the program assemblies held at their junior high schools. This group cited students, both in and out of the program, as being most helpful to their decision to attend the program.

Parents were consistent with their support. They were in agreement with 87 percent of the high school choices and 84 percent of the program selections.

Students identified teachers as being helpful in their choices in only 28 percent of their responses. Counselors and guidance activities were helpful vehicles
for 74 percent of the students.

Classmates influenced students' decisions in 71 (61.7 percent) instances. Where classmates were not acknowledged, 66 percent stated that current magnet program students had a positive impact on their decisions.

The reputation of the school was cited by 64 (56 percent) of the group as a definite feature. Of that group of 64, 45 were influenced by peers not in attendance at the given school.

There were 96 students who had made career decisions. Of that group, 69 (71.9 percent) said that the major contributing factor to their decision was their last school's guidance program.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

From the outset, the author acknowledges the magnitude of the task and inherent problems one encounters when attempting to gain an understanding of any aspect of an educational issue so all-encompassing as alternative programming. These points thoroughly considered, the expressed intent of this research has been:

- In general, to contribute to the current base of information regarding how students made the decision to attend magnet programs in Providence, Rhode Island;
- to gather and provide student feedback about selection of optional educational programs; and
- to offer factors influencing students' decisions based upon the groups' response, which school officials may consider when attracting, training, and retaining high school students in alternative programs.

The research relied mainly on written survey methodology, although the work was not confined by that methodology. Historical data from documents and a review
of related literature also influenced and guided the study.

The findings have limited generalizability. They are the result of an inquiry of 115 Providence, Rhode Island, students enrolled in the magnet program. The findings and recommendations may assist the Providence schools as they develop recruitment strategies to entice students to enroll in the various magnets.

The intent of the Federal Government in funding the Providence, Rhode Island, ESAA Magnet Programs in 1977 was to provide a mechanism for high school desegregation by student choice. In 1977, ESAA funds were used for research of both appropriate sites to offer alternatives and appropriate vocational/avocational offerings to be offered within those sites. The program's basic curricula were established during that period. Recruitment teams were then organized to approach junior and senior high school youngsters to allow them to buy into the alternatives to be offered.

This research attempted to examine why students chose to attend Providence's alternative programs. More specifically, it asked those students to react to the literature review's findings that the most critical elements in school choice, by students, are:

(1) awareness
Conclusions

Awareness Informational Activities

The conclusions drawn are based solely on students' responses and program awareness processes used in the Providence, Rhode Island, magnet programs. Had Providence made greater use of other strategies such as parents, churches, community recreational resources, the mass media, or had the programs differed, the results might have varied considerably.

According to the survey items, 107 respondents (93 percent) credited school program related activities/persons with providing the initial exposure to alternatives. Within school related activities, the magnet program assemblies conducted by magnet program students and students/friends currently in the programs account for 60 percent of the students' initial awareness. These findings suggest that schools/friends currently in the programs account for 60 percent of the students' initial awareness. These findings suggest that schools/programs must take an aggressive role in exposing students to
alternatives if those alternatives are to attract their share of students from among those who would normally attend the comprehensive high schools. That aggressive role should include other methods of exposure such as assemblies, student interactions with students currently in programs, and student visits to program schools. Additionally, the counselor/teacher plays an important role in selling vocational/avocational alternatives.

The utilization of counselors, students, and visuals did serve to effectively expose high school magnet programs to those who enrolled in the alternatives.

Parents

While parental involvement is virtually non-existent in Providence as a method of providing a student exposure to alternatives, it is very visible at the time the student makes a high school program choice. Providence magnet school parents overwhelmingly sanctioned school (87 percent) and program (84.3 percent) selections.

It is worthwhile to note that parental endorsement of school and program occurred for 85 percent of the students even though only 25 percent of the parents attended that school. Only 20 percent of the parents were employed in a field for which the student would be receiving preparation, suggesting that thought, rather than emulation, occurred prior to student selection. This suggests that schools
might do well to orient parents to programs that affect their children and that parental endorsement might be sought by most students prior to finalizing important educational decisions.

While students responded that magnet program assemblies held for parents contributed to their (the students') decisions in only 49 percent of the instances, one has no way of telling how important it was to make those assemblies available to all parents nor whether the fact that parents had been invited to the school at night to receive program orientation did, in fact, facilitate endorsement.

Students not only turn to parents, but also to other adults not necessarily connected with the schools. When Providence students were asked whether the combined group of parents/other adults was instrumental in their decision, 73 percent indicated affirmatively. Providence and other districts may want to be certain that they articulate their programs and their objectives to all sectors of the community because those sectors do have an impact on the decisions of students.

Counselors/Teachers

S. Theodore Woal, as mentioned in the literature review, stated that "the teachers and counselors representing the schools are relatively minor influences in
career development opportunities.\textsuperscript{95} As it relates to the magnet program students in Providence, that statement is only partly correct. Teachers were helpful to student choice in only 28 percent of the cases. That is a small percentage, but nearly three times Woal's findings of 9 percent.

Of the students questioned, 46 percent acknowledged that they had received career counseling from their last schools. That percentage, along with responses by students that counselors and guidance activities did influence their decisions nearly 75 percent of the time, suggests that the counseling process was a major influencer in the sample group's decision.

Counselors at the middle and junior high schools have a role in the program of studies their students elect to pursue in the high schools. The extent of their referrals may very well be in proportion to their own awareness of the value and intent of the District's alternatives. It would, therefore, seem that the more the middle grades counselor knows about a program, the more effective he/she can be in presenting the alternative to his/her students.

Siblings/Peers

As a response to each question concerning the influence of siblings or peers on their choices, Providence students answered in a 45-66 percent range that siblings or peers were helpful. Seventy-six students responded that current program members influenced their decisions by either their presentations or conversations held formally and informally to discuss aspects of the alternatives.

While these figures do not make the "sibling/peer" category the dominant influencer, one must be aware that this is another group that can make an impression on students who are about to make a choice of schools and curricula to pursue. Ninth and tenth graders explaining a program and describing their career goals can serve as an invaluable recruiting tool for those eighth graders about to make high school choices.

The 45-66 percent range of responses may not accurately portray the importance of siblings/peers on decision-making given that some students may not have older brothers or sisters with whom to discuss their choices, and also that all enrollees may not have had the opportunity to discuss the magnet program with a student-presenter. A planner might want to be certain that ample time is allowed for interaction to occur between student-presenters and
perspective enrollees. That planned discussion period could possibly greatly enhance the role of the peer as an influencer.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings of the "Magnet Program Student Survey," administered to a selected group of Providence, Rhode Island, students, the researcher has developed a series of recommendations. It is hoped that these recommendations may be viewed as planning strategies for Providence and other school districts considering initiating alternative programs which require students to select from among a number of schools.

As individuals view these recommendations, they must be aware of certain limitations of the study, namely:

- That it was administered in June, 1982, to 115 students in Providence, Rhode Island.
- That the students responding to the survey were students who had made the decision to attend a magnet program.
- That the vehicle for data collection was a 28 item questionnaire.

The first recommendation offered addresses how a district provides initial awareness of magnet programs to potential students. In Providence, it appears that
multiple modes of program presentation contributed to student awareness. The survey showed that awareness was gained by staff presentations (40.0 percent), assemblies (35.7 percent), and conversations with magnet program students (16.5 percent).

Closely related to the first recommendation is the recognition of the role of the junior/senior high school counselors in both the awareness and selection processes. In addition to providing awareness to the magnet programs for ninth graders, counselors also provided continuous exposure to careers for students in all grades of the middle/junior high schools. It is suggested that strategies be developed to incorporate this group's ideas into the alternative at the earliest stages of development.

Counselors were identified as the persons responsible for exposing students to the various courses of study offered by the high schools. If the alternative is to be a successful district effort, it will be essential that the counselor knows the purpose and requirements of the program. Even further, it will also be critical that the counselor enthusiastically transfer this information to students as a positive, legitimate method of satisfying their high school requirement.

Another recommendation offered as a result of the survey is that when marketing the program, the alternative
should involve students currently in the program. As mentioned before, when students can learn about the program from their friends or students one or two years their senior, it allows them to better understand where they may be at a given time within that program. Sometimes more insight may be gained by students or peers demonstrating a program activity than by any explanations offered by teachers and other adults.

One of the questions asked of students was whether expectations of performance and behavior were helpful in their decisions to attend a program. In 73 instances (63.5 percent), students responded "yes" to this question.

Certain alternative programs have entry requirements; others don't. A theatre program may require either a dance or musical background as minimum for admission. Others may require the student to have made certain academic progress at the junior high or middle school levels. Others may allow all students to enter.

For any alternative, students must know early what the expectations are for success. If attendance and academic averages are required, students must be told why and how adherence to those requirements benefits them. If study beyond class time is expected, then they must know that the end product will result in, as an example, not only theoretical information, but also practical
application, or usage of the material to be learned. This recommendation, while not supported by the findings, is being presented because it was an original part of the presentation made to the Providence students and their parents. It then served as a common guide for all parties; faculty, students, and parents.

Parents were instrumental in making students aware of the magnet programs in less than 3 percent of the responses. In comparison, parents were in agreement with school and program selection in at least 85 percent of the student responses. At the junior high or middle school grades the school system must begin to provide an awareness to parents that they too can stimulate and educate children. Parents need to know what the course offerings will be and how the experience will prepare their child. Parents also need to get a sense of the method of instruction that will be employed by the alternative.

Just as students may be used to sell alternatives to other students, parents may also serve as program spokespersons. An alternative high school curriculum review committee which consists of parents with students in the program and parents of junior high school students may indeed assist in defining reasonable objectives and may serve as public relations personnel for the programs.
In Providence, career education and awareness programs were offered in the early elementary grades through the junior high grades. It was the desire of the Board and the Superintendent that students at all levels begin to get a sense of employment opportunities in existence within their environment as well as the relationship of their study experiences to the world of work.

The findings of the survey indicate that 96 (86.5 percent) had made career choices at the time that the survey was conducted. While it was not determined whether these decisions were made prior to, or while in the program, career awareness at an earlier age may serve as a means for providing a relationship between work and the program options offered at the high school level.

In conclusion, parents, teachers, counselors, and peers all influence students' high school selection decisions. For that reason, each must be made aware of school programs and changes on a continuous basis.

Providence's magnet program students had the benefit of the multiple approach to program awareness. If this approach is to be continued and effective, program information must be shared with parents of all age/grade levels. By keeping parents abreast of the magnet program developments, the District could possibly create a new, heretofore untapped, resource group which might provide an awareness
for students.

The same might hold true for teachers. If they are to provide magnet program guidance services to students and parents, they, too, must be informed of the programs' contents, value, and the options and benefits available to students.

Students, counselors, and peers in the program were helpful to Providence's magnets in a variety of ways. Their roles should continue to be expanded at both the program awareness and the decision-making levels.

Finally, the District must continue to emphasize the potential rewards and employment options for students attending the program. If it is to make demands for attendance and performance, it must also place emphasis on the benefits to be derived from the program and by adherence to the program's rules.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A
TEACHER SURVEY INSTRUCTIONS
TEACHER SURVEY INSTRUCTIONS

To: Teachers and Administrators Conducting the Magnet Programs Survey

From: Lynn H. Smith, Researcher

Thank you for agreeing to implement this survey. The data, once collected, will be most beneficial for my research and could be of significant value to you in the future recruitment and retention endeavors.

Please observe the following guides:

(1) At the beginning of the class period, please allow 15 minutes for students to respond to the questions.

(2) If possible, please administer the survey in a room where students can be seated and where they may have an adequate writing surface.

Hopefully, we will get better feedback if you inform your students prior to the survey that:

(1) The data requested is part of a much larger survey designed to get a sense of how high school students select their high schools and courses.

(2) This survey will not be used to measure how one student/school makes decisions vs. another student/school. This is not a contest.

(3) Students do not have to sign their names if they care not to do so.

(4) This data will eventually help the recruitment of students by all schools and programs.

(5) This is a survey, not a rigid, time test. There are no right or wrong responses.

(6) They would best serve the program and its future students if they responded conscientiously and accurately to the questions.
APPENDIX B
MAGNET PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY
MAGNET PROGRAM STUDENT SURVEY

INSTRUCTIONS: Please read each question carefully. Once you've read the question, please place a check next to the answer that best fits your response.

(1) Which magnet program do you now attend?
   _____ Arts/Communication   _____ Health
   _____ Business            _____ Science
   _____ Government/Law

(2) How many years have you been in a high school magnet program? _____

(3) What is your current class standing?
   _____ Freshman   _____ Junior
   _____ Sophomore   _____ Senior

(4) Was this the school you originally wanted to attend?
   _____ Yes   _____ No

(5) If there were no magnet programs, to what school would you have been assigned?
   _____ Central   _____ Hope   _____ Mount Pleasant

(6) Did your last school provide career counseling for you?
   _____ Yes   _____ No   _____ Don't Know

(7) What most accurately describes how you became aware of the high school magnet programs?
   _____ Counselor/Teacher   _____ Magnet Program
         _____ Student/Friend   _____ Assemblies
         _____ Other (Explain):
         _______________________
         _______________________

(8) Were students in the program helpful in your decision to attend the magnet?
   _____ Yes   _____ No
If yes, how?

- Assembly presentations
- Talks at your school
- Conversations out-of-school
- Other (Explain):

(9) Were other school guidance activities helpful in your decision to attend the magnet program?

- Very Helpful
- Helpful
- Not at all helpful

(10) Did a teacher(s) from your last school help you to select the magnet program?

- Yes
- No

(11) Were the expectations for performance and behavior helpful to your decision to attend the program?

- Yes
- No
- Was not aware of the expectations

(12) Is a member of your family working in a field that is related to your magnet program selection?

- Yes
- No

If yes, did that person provide advice which helped you to make your program choice?

- Yes
- No

(13) Were your parents/guardians in agreement with your high school selection?

- Yes
- No

(14) Were your parents/guardians in agreement with your program selection?

- Yes
- No

(15) Were the student/parent programs held at the high school helpful to your decision to attend the program?

- Yes
- No
- No affect on my decision
(16) Did either parent/guardian attend this high school?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

(17) Did older brothers, sisters, or friends advise you as to which high school you should attend?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

(18) Did older brothers, sisters, or friends advise you as to which magnet you should attend?
   _____ Yes  _____ No

(19) Were talks with parents, guardians, or other adults (not in the School Department) helpful in your decision to attend the magnet program?
   _____ Very helpful  _____ Not at all helpful
       _____ Helpful

(20) To what extent did your classmates influence your decisions as to which school to attend?
   _____ Greatly influenced  _____ Slightly influenced
       _____ Not at all

(21) To what extent did your school's reputation influence your decision?
   _____ Greatly influenced  _____ Slightly influenced
       _____ Not at all

(22) To what extent did the reputation of the principal and faculty influence your decision?
   _____ Greatly influenced  _____ Slightly influenced
       _____ Not at all

(23) To what extent did the school's sports and other extra-activities influence your decision?
   _____ Greatly influenced  _____ Slightly influenced
       _____ Not at all

(24) Have you decided on the type of work you want to do upon finishing school?
   _____ Yes, definitely decided  _____ Not at this time
       _____ Somewhat decided
(25) Does the program offer the courses and experiences that you expected?

___ Yes  ___ No  ___ Not sure at this time

(26) Now that you know more about the program, if you were starting in the 9th grade again, would you still select the magnet?

___ Yes  ___ No  ___ Not sure at this time

(27) If you have a choice, will you remain in the program the next school year?

___ Yes  ___ No  ___ Not sure at this time

(28) What would you suggest be done differently to attract more students into the program? Please comment:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

THANK YOU.

________________________________________________________________________

Name (Optional)