

# Deliberative Democratic Evaluation: Successes and Limitations of an Evaluation of School Choice

KENNETH R. HOWE

*University of Colorado—Boulder*

CATHERINE ASHCRAFT

*Western Washington University*

*This article briefly characterizes a deliberative democratic approach to program evaluation, recounts its application to the evaluation of school choice policy in the Boulder Valley School District, and describes the results and recommendations of the evaluation. It then assesses the evaluation in terms of its role in stimulating policy change and how it fits with the requirements of the deliberative democratic ideal. It concludes with an assessment of the deliberative democratic approach itself in light of the Boulder experience.*

The idea of “participatory” program evaluation has become increasingly prominent in recent years. In this article, we briefly describe one kind of participatory conception—“deliberative democratic evaluation” (House & Howe, 1999)<sup>1</sup>—and recount a case study evaluation of the school choice policy in the Boulder Valley School District that was guided by it. We appraise the evaluation in terms of the requirements of the deliberative democratic conception and in terms of its role in stimulating policy change. We end with a discussion of the successes and limitations of deliberative democratic evaluation in terms of the Boulder experience.

## DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC EVALUATION CHARACTERIZED

The evaluation of educational policies unavoidably assumes some stance toward stakeholder participation and, along with this, some stance toward democratic decision making. The deliberative democratic approach to evaluation is grounded in deliberative democratic theory, which adopts a relatively strong stance toward stakeholder participation.<sup>2</sup> Deliberative

democratic theory emphasizes developing political practices and institutions that mitigate power imbalances among citizens so as to permit their free and equal participation. A necessary feature of practices and institutions that satisfy this ideal is that the procedures are designed to engage participants in *genuine deliberation*, motivated by the goal of fostering the common good, rather than engaging them in *strategic bargaining*, motivated by the goal of maximizing their perceived self-interests (see, for example, Cohen, 1999; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; and Rawls, 1999, for various tacks on this general point).

In our view, the evaluation of educational programs also should be designed to engage free and equal participants in deliberations about the common good. Because program evaluation has its own distinctive features as a practice, however, the principles of deliberative democratic theory must be tailored accordingly. In the conceptualization employed here (see House & Howe, 1999), deliberative democratic evaluation is characterized by three general principles: inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation.

#### INCLUSION

The principle of inclusion requires that all groups with a significant interest—all “stakeholders”—in the evaluation of a program or policy be included. Inclusion comes in different degrees, ranging from the passive (e.g., participants filling out a fixed-response survey) to the active (e.g., participants engaging in face-to-face discussions.) And there are many places in between, including the representative (e.g., evaluators interpreting and reporting the results of their face-to-face dialogue with participants). There is no general rule regarding which point along this continuum from passive to active is always best. That has to be decided on a case-by-case basis and will depend on the existent background knowledge, the nature of the questions to be addressed, the available resources, the timeline, and so forth.

There is no guarantee that educational policy evaluation will be rendered democratic solely by being inclusive, particularly where inclusion is passive. Passive inclusion is not enough to ensure that the voices included will be genuine. This requires active inclusion, which shades into the requirement of dialogue.

#### DIALOGUE

Whereas inclusion ranges from passive to active, dialogue ranges from elucidating to critical. Elucidating dialogue is limited to clarifying the views and self-understandings of research participants. Critical dialogue includes clarifying the views and self-understandings of research participants but also subjecting these views and self-understandings to rational scrutiny. This kind of dialogue underwrites deliberation (described more fully below), an evidence-driven

cognitive activity in which participants and evaluators collaboratively engage and from which the most rationally defensible conclusions emerge.<sup>3</sup>

## DELIBERATION

Just as active inclusion shades into dialogue, critical dialogue shades into deliberation. The manner in which dialogue is structured and the information that is entered into it are each important in determining whether it is deliberative. When people enter into dialogue about educational policies, they can be mistaken or misinformed about the harms and benefits of various educational policies, including to themselves. Simply clarifying how they think things work and ought to work can be no more than one element of genuine, or critical, dialogue. The crux of the deliberative democratic view is that reaching evaluative conclusions, including value-laden ones, should be evidence based and requires genuine cognitive give and take.

The deliberative democratic approach is conceived as a method that mitigates inequalities in power among stakeholders. Of course, certain people come to deliberations with more knowledge, better sources of information, and greater facility with discursive practices than certain others do. It would be Pollyannaish in the extreme to think that people will blithely give up the strategic advantage that these sources of power give them. But it would be cynical in the extreme to think that people never can nor will embrace the higher principles of equality and fair play. The chances that they will are increased when they can be assured that these higher principles will frame dialogue and that, by adopting them, they won't thereby lose out to others who are permitted to manipulate the dialogue to serve their self-interests (e.g., Rawls, 1971).

Evaluators can give some such assurances—though no guarantees, of course—in contexts in which they have a reasonable control over what participants will be included and the forums for deliberation. For example, they can monitor and direct dialogue to reduce inequality in deliberative forums. They can employ various formal devices, for example, establishing minority caucuses to help ensure that when minority groups participate in larger forums, they do so under conditions that better approximate freedom and equality. Finally, evaluators can ensure that relevant and credible empirical evidence from both the local and the broader arenas of social research informs deliberation.

## DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC EVALUATION APPLIED: AN EVALUATION OF ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CHOICE POLICY<sup>4</sup>

The ideal of deliberative democratic evaluation guided the design and conduct of a yearlong evaluation of the Boulder Valley School District

school choice (“open enrollment”) policy that was completed in late 2000 (see Howe & Eisenhart, 2000; Howe, Eisenhart, & Betebenner, 2001). The evaluation was commissioned by the district, which perceived the need for a systematic examination of the effects of its open enrollment system following 5 years of rapid, unplanned growth. During this time, much anecdotal information had accumulated, both pro and con.

## BACKGROUND

Boulder Valley School District is centered in Boulder, Colorado. Boulder has a population of approximately 100,000 and is home to the main campus of the University of Colorado. Nicknamed the “People’s Republic,” Boulder is noted for its liberal politics in an otherwise conservative state. Boulder Valley enrolls approximately 27,000 students. Whites constitute approximately 80% of the student enrollment; Latinos constitute approximately 12% and are the largest racial/ethnic minority by far. The district boundaries reach well beyond the confines of the city of Boulder. The eastern portion of the district includes the town of Lafayette, which has the highest percentage of Latinos.

Open enrollment—the option of parents to choose Boulder Valley schools on a space-available basis—began with the formation of the district in 1961. But the scale of open enrollment significantly increased in the mid-1990s as it evolved to include various additional kinds of school choice options, including charter schools, focus schools (similar to magnets), and strands (curricular choice options within schools). Prior to the 1994–1995 school year, there were just five articulated choice options in the Boulder Valley Schools; by the 1999–2000 school year, the number had grown to 21 (of 57 schools) and enrolled over 20% of the district’s students.

This growth was associated with a new mission. Whereas the original choice options emphasized diversity, integrated learning, bilingual education, or some combination, half of the 16 options created between 1994 and 1995 and 1999 and 2000 emphasized academic rigor and college preparation. The new mission was spurred by a group of parents discontent with the district’s implementation of the “middle school philosophy” and by a larger group who believed that sufficient emphasis on academic achievement was lacking. It also fit with principles driving the school choice movement in the state and the nation, such as increasing parental autonomy and using market competition to drive improvement.

Our invitation to conduct the evaluation coincided with the launching of a community *deliberative process* that had been undertaken by Boulder Valley in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation and the Colorado Association of School Boards. It too addressed Boulder Valley’s school choice policy but centered on recent controversies surrounding school closure and

consolidation. The process was led by a steering committee composed of community members and parents, and representatives from Kettering, the Colorado Association of School Boards, and the Boulder Valley district central office. The members of the committee negotiated the most important issues to be addressed and then discussed them with various groups throughout the district. The process culminated in a meeting open to all community members in which the results of preceding deliberations were described and discussed. The committee then prepared a written report that was posted on the Boulder Valley Web site.

In our early negotiations with district officials about how our evaluation would proceed, we suggested that it become a central part of the deliberative process. In particular, we suggested that the role of the evaluation team should be to bring existing empirical research to the table, to undertake empirical investigations of issues that were identified on the local scene, and to actively participate in the deliberative process from start to finish. We reasoned that such an approach fit very well with the deliberative democratic framework. District officials declined our suggestion, however, on the grounds that in order for our research to qualify as “objective,” we would have to work independently of the district and the school board.

From the outset, then, we were required to adjust the ideal of deliberative democratic evaluation to the political context, particularly the level of trust (distrust) among certain stakeholders toward district officials and the school board. This did not mean, however, that we would trade “objectivity” for the requirements of deliberative democracy. We assured Boulder Valley officials that the evaluation would be objective in the sense that we had no preconceived notions that we wouldn’t subject to test by the data. But we also made it clear that the evaluation would not be “value free.” As dictated by the deliberative democratic approach (not that we explicitly named it as such), we would be taking a close look at the controversial, value-laden issues of stratification, skimming, and funding inequities—issues that we knew through informal means were simmering in the district and that were also animating national controversies—and we would be seeking out voices that had been muted or unheard as participation in Boulder Valley’s open enrollment system had burgeoned.

#### STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

We embarked on the evaluation with a more modest view of the kind of stakeholder participation that we could and should strive for in the research process. As described below, we observed the principles of inclusion and dialogue but decided against challenging stakeholders’ claims.

Five kinds of data were collected: surveys of parents and educators in Boulder Valley schools; focus group discussions with this same group; a

follow-up survey of principals; a random telephone survey of Boulder Valley parents; and statistical records of the district's open enrollment patterns, test scores, demographics, funding, and fundraising.

The parent-educator surveys and focus group discussions elicited the beliefs and attitudes about open enrollment held by people actively involved in Boulder Valley schools. A total of 466 individuals participated. Eighteen choice schools and 23 neighborhood schools participated in the surveys and focus groups across 5 high schools, 11 middle schools, and 28 elementary schools. The telephone surveys elicited the beliefs and attitudes of district parents who had not participated in open enrollment and were not active in Boulder Valley schools. Thirty surveys were conducted in each of Boulder Valley's 8 geographic regions, yielding a total of 240.

### *Inclusion*

The principle of inclusion applied rather straightforwardly. Parents, teachers, and school administrators were identified as the stakeholders whose voices needed to be heard, and we obtained a reasonably representative sample from each group. As described above, we surveyed and conducted focus groups with a variety of school groups composed of these stakeholders across a range of levels (elementary, middle, and high) and types of district schools (choice versus neighborhood); we also conducted a random telephone survey of parents who were not active in the school district or their children's schools. The focus groups exemplified a relatively active form of inclusion, and the surveys, a relatively passive form.

### *Dialogue*

The primary forums for dialogue were the focus groups in individual schools, in which we probed for participants' perspectives on how the school choice system had affected their schools and what they believed to be the benefits and harms of school choice for the district overall. The form of dialogue was almost exclusively elucidating. Only on rare occasions did the evaluators challenge what participants had to say and engage them in critical dialogue (though participants did engage one another in critical dialogue with some frequency).

There were two strategic reasons for this approach. First, the time constraints under which we were working (1 1/2 to 2 hours per school group meeting) made it imperative for us to focus on getting the variety of views expressed, which would have been very difficult if we engaged in a truly critical dialogue. Second, we had to heed the political context described

earlier. Suspicion of Boulder Valley district officials and the school board rubbed off on the evaluation that they had commissioned, and it came from both sides; certain critics of the open enrollment system accused us of doing “market research” on behalf of choice schools, whereas certain supporters of the system accused us of doing a “push poll” to make choice schools look bad. The admonition on the part of Boulder Valley officials for the evaluators to remain objective turned out to be wise counsel indeed. The consequence, however, was that critical dialogue would have to occur in some forum other than that provided by face-to-face interactions associated with the school-based focus groups.

### *Deliberation*

Within the deliberative democratic conception of evaluation, critical dialogue shades into and underwrites the more general process of deliberation. Because little by way of critical dialogue occurred during the process of the evaluation, little by way of deliberation occurred. As we describe later, deliberation occurred for the most part only after the evaluation report was completed and its findings and recommendations were disseminated.

### SELECTED FINDINGS

#### *Parents' and educators' perceptions of open enrollment*

There was very strong agreement among the more than 700 people surveyed that school choice is an effective means of responding to the diversity of students' interests and needs. Agreement was equally strong that various inequities existed in the open enrollment system. What most divided people were their views on the seriousness and scope of these inequities.

Almost all agreed that lack of transportation and information reduced or eliminated the opportunities for certain parents to participate in open enrollment. But a significant number—associated primarily with schools that had experienced enrollment declines, reductions in staff and programs, increasing proportions of minority and low-income students, or schools that had since been closed—perceived a number of additional problems. Among these were that open enrollment has tended to increase the concentration of ethnic/racial minorities and low-income students at certain schools; that some schools had become stronger while others had been weakened; that some parents had been able to raise large sums of money for their schools while others had not; and that some schools had been able to find many parents to participate in school-related activities, including fundraising, while others had found only a few.

*Factors in open enrollment patterns*

Two factors were most strongly associated with the open enrollment demand for Boulder Valley schools: test scores and parental satisfaction. In general, choice schools were more in demand than neighborhood schools, parents were more satisfied with them, and those that emphasized academics had higher test scores. The data suggested that Latinos were less motivated by test scores and satisfaction ratings than Whites or were willing to trade these for bilingual programs.

The importance of test scores was reflected in the pools of students requesting open enrollment for sixth and ninth grades, when they enter middle school and high school. In general, those students had higher test scores than their Boulder Valley cohorts and applied disproportionately to schools with higher test scores. Thus, a form of skimming occurred at both the middle and high school levels, but not in the sense of schools selecting the highest scoring students from among students in the pools. Rather, the pools themselves were composed of higher scoring students. Skimming occurred in the sense that some schools were drawing a disproportionate number (or all) of their students from the high-scoring pool, whereas other schools were losing a disproportionate number.

Race/ethnicity was a prominent feature of regional open enrollment patterns. Students left regions with higher percentages of minorities for regions with lower percentages. Overall, Boulder Valley schools became more stratified by race/ethnicity following the expansion of open enrollment in the mid-1990s. For example, 1 of 29 (3%) elementary schools had a minority enrollment of more than 50% in 1994–1995; by 1999–2000, five of 34 (15%) had a minority enrollment of more than 50%. Increased stratification was very similar with respect to low-income students. The primary mechanism was “White flight”—that is, White (high-income) students disproportionately left schools that had relatively high percentages of minority (low-income) students to begin with.

The Boulder Valley open enrollment procedures and practices helped explain the observed patterns. Requiring parents to obtain their own information on open enrollment rather than sending them information, requiring them to visit schools in which they wish to open enroll, and requiring them to provide their own transportation helped explain why open enrollment had a stratifying effect. This favored parents with savvy, time, and resources, and with connections to the parent information network. That some charter and focus schools had created their own list of open enrollment preferences and requirements probably also contributed to stratification. For example, some choice schools afforded preferences to certain groups, such as siblings of graduates, children of teachers and staff, and students previously enrolled in a tuition-based preschool program.



Some had additional application requirements, such as interviews and supplementary forms to fill out, and some had additional expectations for parental participation, formalized in written agreements.

### *Funding and fundraising*

Choice schools generally had high per-pupil costs, primarily because of their generally small size. In light of the fact that stratification in Boulder Valley schools associated with open enrollment patterns had been increasing, the advent and protection of small, relatively expensive choice schools that serve predominantly White middle-class students made relatively fewer resources available for needier students in Boulder Valley's traditional schools. Furthermore, the Boulder Valley funding formula made no provision to pass through the additional per-pupil funding amount for low-income students (approximately \$535) that it receives from the state. If passed through, two of Boulder Valley's middle schools and four of its elementary schools would have received over \$80,000 more funding; three elementary schools would have received over \$50,000 more. Instead, the additional funding simply went into the general fund, to be distributed separate from low-income enrollment in individual Boulder Valley schools.

Boulder Valley schools generated funds in addition to those provided by the district in a number of ways, ranging from selling grocery store coupons, wrapping paper, and candy to soliciting parents to donate stocks. As a school's percentage of low-income students increased, its ability to fundraise decreased, and vice versa. A low free and reduced lunch percentage did not guarantee a high fundraising amount, but those elementary schools that raised the most had relatively low free and reduced lunch percentages. The relationship was less ambiguous at the low end of fundraising amounts. That is, high free and reduced lunch percentages pretty much guaranteed low per-pupil fundraising amounts. Because they had much wider discretion, charter schools could also use fundraising dollars for purposes such as increasing the salaries of teachers or administrators they wished to retain, unfettered by the Boulder Valley salary schedule. The per-pupil funding charter schools received from Boulder Valley thus functioned like a voucher that they were free to supplement with the additional funds they raised.

### SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

Twelve recommendations for change in the open enrollment policy resulted from the study (Howe & Eisenhart, 2000). Below we describe the eight that are most germane to our purposes here. Several implicitly incorporate findings not previously discussed.

1. *Open enrollment procedures should be centralized.* Individual schools have major responsibility for administering the open enrollment system, which requires considerable effort and resources on their part. A significant number of school communities see the effort and resources that they must devote to open enrollment as unduly burdensome and as compromising their ability to pursue educational goals. Because individual schools must provide information on their open enrollment requests to the district for budgeting purposes and the open enrollment lottery, the system also results in double handling of open enrollment applications and thus in inefficiency.

2. *Parents of prospective open enrollees should not be required to visit the school(s) to which they wish to apply for open enrollment.* Such a requirement is inequitable for parents who lack the time and resources to arrange school visits and should not be a condition of taking advantage of open enrollment.

3. *Open enrollment procedures and requirements should be consistent across schools.* The open enrollment procedures and requirements across Boulder Valley schools are not consistent. Certain focus and charter schools have established their own preferences and requirements that go beyond those of the district and that are prima facie exclusionary. The district should consider abolishing all such preferences and requirements.

4. *Free transportation should be made available for open enrollees.* The district should undertake to make free transportation available for all students accepted for open enrollment. Currently, open enrolled students are required to provide their own transportation. This creates an insurmountable obstacle for all those wishing to take advantage of open enrollment who cannot provide their own transportation.

5. *Open enrollment information should be sent to all Boulder Valley parents.* A large number of Boulder Valley parents lack good information about open enrollment under the current system. The district should mail information on open enrollment, in languages other than English as appropriate, to all Boulder Valley parents apprising them of their opportunity to apply for open enrollment and how to go about it. The mailing should also include an application and pertinent information about Boulder Valley schools, with suggestions on how to evaluate such information, particularly what average test scores mean for their individual children. In addition to apprising a much larger number of parents of their opportunities, such mailings would

also help mitigate the disadvantage of neighborhood schools in student recruitment.

*6. The Boulder Valley funding formula should take into account the characteristics of school populations.* The Boulder Valley funding formula should be revised to take into account the characteristics of school populations, particularly their percentages of low-income students. The current formula makes no allowance in allocations from the general fund for the relatively large proportions of low-income students in certain schools. This is prima facie inequitable given that the Boulder Valley per-pupil allocation derived from the Colorado School Finance Act rises as the percentage of low-income students rises. The inequity has been exacerbated by the fact that open enrollment has resulted in larger proportions of low-income students being concentrated in certain schools. To the extent that low-income students have educational needs that require more resources to meet (the rationale for the low-income allocation in the state financing formula), the current Boulder Valley formula also provides a disincentive for schools to enroll low-income students.

*7. Inequalities in individual school fundraising should be addressed.* Individual Boulder Valley schools vary considerably in their capacity for fundraising, an often-cited source of inequity that has been exacerbated by the stratifying effects of open enrollment. To mitigate this source of inequity, the district might consider requiring individual schools to contribute a portion of the funds they raise to a district fund to be redistributed to individual schools and students most in need (perhaps earmarked for transportation). Alternatively, or in addition, the district might direct its discretionary funds and encourage organizations such as the Boulder Valley School Foundation to direct theirs toward individual schools least able to raise their own funds. Among the justifications for such a requirement are that individual schools are a part of the larger Boulder Valley community and take advantage of Boulder Valley resources and facilities in their fundraising efforts.

*8. Stratification by race/ethnicity and income should be addressed.* The district should consider measures to reduce the stratification by race/ethnicity and income among Boulder Valley schools caused by open enrollment. Such stratification not only raises equity issues but also narrows the educational experiences of Boulder Valley students. The district should seek legal counsel to investigate the possibility of stratifying its open enrollment

lotteries by income and race/ethnicity, though only the former is likely to be legally permissible.

#### EFFECTS OF THE EVALUATION ON PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICY

As we indicated above, the research process involved very little by way of deliberation. Viewed from one angle, the study findings and recommendations exemplified deliberation in the attenuated sense that they challenged certain stakeholders' views and confirmed certain others' views by appeal to empirical findings of the study—for example, the evidence on racial/ethnic stratification, skimming, and unequal opportunities for certain parents to participate. Viewed from another angle, although the research process did not exemplify deliberation, its findings and recommendations provided grist for subsequent deliberation. The evaluation indirectly—and slowly—contributed significantly to public deliberation about Boulder Valley's school choice policy and changes in it. Below is a chronicle of those events.

##### *Dissemination*

The results of the study were first made public when Howe (principal investigator) presented a summary of the choice study and its recommendations to a public meeting of the Boulder Valley school board in late October 2000. (The meeting was videotaped and later broadcast on the local public access television station.) During this meeting, several board members expressed dismay at the funding inequities described in the report and seemed a bit disarmed by the fact that they existed.

Several board members were also dismayed by the findings on stratification. In a rare challenge of the findings, they questioned whether open enrollment had in fact caused stratification, arguing that stratification had always existed in Boulder Valley. Howe responded by elaborating that, although stratification had indeed always existed, the data indicated that stratification had markedly increased following the expansion of open enrollment. The board members in question accepted the response. Another board member then called for an immediate study of the costs of free transportation to determine whether this was a feasible way to help remedy the stratification problem.

A few weeks later, in November, Howe made a similar presentation to the Boulder Valley School District Leadership Council, composed primarily of the district principals, vice principals, and the central administration.

Funding again arose as a contentious issue because some worried that redistributing funding to more needy schools would encourage wealthier parents to leave the district and enroll in private schools. Howe responded that there is a point at which this becomes extortion on the part of those who threaten to leave unless they get their demands met. In addition to these two meetings, in March 2001, Howe and Eisenhart (coinvestigators) participated in a call-in show on the local public radio station that focused on the results of the study. It sparked little controversy.

The study was also disseminated electronically. Boulder Valley posted the executive summary and recommendations on its Web site immediately following the school board meeting in which it was discussed, and made the full report available in hard copy at cost. Subsequently, the executive summary, recommendations, and full report were made available at the University of Colorado's Education and the Public Interest Center Web site. The study was also covered in an article in *Education Week*.

#### *Response in the local press*

In the first 4 months following its initial release, the study and its impact on Boulder Valley open enrollment garnered ongoing press coverage. The items primarily focused on the study's recommendations for changing the open enrollment process, if and how these recommendations were being implemented, and to what extent. The first of these articles appeared the day after the study was released, when the local Boulder newspaper, the *Daily Camera*, ran a front-page story covering Howe's presentation to the school board.

During the next 4 months, 10 articles covering open enrollment surfaced, eight of which directly mentioned the study. The first of these appeared November 6 (Jefferson, 2000), approximately a week after the study release, and announced a series of three community meetings where district officials would be discussing their recommendations for changing open enrollment with the public. The article noted that a number of these changes stemmed from the results of the choice study done by the university and implied that the study would be discussed at the meetings. However, district personnel had not planned to talk about the study but had planned to focus instead on proposed centralization of the open enrollment process. This created significant confusion at the three meetings because a number of citizens referred to the "CU study." For example, early in the first meeting, a community member brought up the issue of "White flight in the CU study." A district official responded that this meeting was not, in fact, about the CU study. Later, another participant insisted that open enrollment "is not sustainable because it is segregating schools" and urged the

district to address the recommendations of the CU study in terms of equitable funding, or “all these little concerns [about centralization and enrollment logistics] are irrelevant.” District officials noted her statement on chart paper where they were recording “recommendations” and comments but did not directly respond because two other participants immediately interjected unrelated comments. Later, a few more participants referred to the CU study, which eventually sparked others to begin asking more questions. The district personnel, however, continued to deflect these comments, insisting that, contrary to the previous day’s newspaper report, these meetings were not about discussing the choice study. Instead, they reiterated that the primary purpose was to discuss centralizing the open enrollment process, a recommendation made by the study but one that district officials said had also been identified by the district before the study’s release. This led to criticism from several audience members who had hoped to discuss the study during the meeting. The meeting disbanded shortly after this discussion. This CU study arose again in the subsequent two meetings, where one participant referred to it as the “800-pound gorilla” waiting to make its entrance. Overall, however, the issue of the study was quelled more easily than in the first meeting because district personnel were more prepared to inform the audience that the study was not what these meetings were about.

During the rest of November and December, six more articles on open enrollment and choice appeared in local newspapers, four of which directly discussed the study. The first of these, on November 18 (Seebach, 2000), marked the first press critique of the study. A columnist for the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* warned that if the study recommendations were followed, parents would be stripped of their right to choose which schools their children would attend. High-achieving students would be robbed of the right to attend “schools where they will be among their academic peers,” while “Hispanic parents might not be allowed to exercise” the choice to place their children in bilingual schools. As a result, she implied that the study was potentially racist as it attempted to “impose new rules basing school attendance on race.” Insisting that more choice, not less, is what is needed, she agreed with the study recommendations to centralize the open enrollment process and to distribute information to all parents in the district.

About a week later, on November 26 (Johnson, 2000), a guest opinion appeared with the large headline proclaiming, “Open Enrollment Is Discriminatory.” The author praised the CU study and focused on the discrimination that open enrollment causes “not by intent, but by end result.” He argued that open enrollment is “our *Brown v. Board of Education*” and urged the community to “learn the facts, consider their effects and somehow pull together to make our schools better for all.” He concluded with,

“If Boulder really is a special place, maybe we can be special people. We owe it to ourselves to try.”

On November 29 (Jefferson, 2000a), roughly three weeks after the community meetings and a subsequent board meeting, the local Boulder newspaper reported that the board had approved the proposed changes to the open enrollment policy and that these changes included (a) centralizing the process, (b) adhering to a fixed deadline for applications, and (c) calling students from wait lists at fixed dates during the year. This article did not mention the CU study; however, the next day, an article appeared in the *Denver Post*, noting that the open enrollment changes fell far short of the recommendations made in the CU study. The article reported that the process would now be centralized but specifically identified the recommendation to offer free transportation as an example of how the proposed changes fell short of the study’s recommendations. It also mentioned that the study claimed that open enrollment was encouraging racial and economic segregation. The school board explained that more recommendations had not yet been implemented because the “board is very practical and finances are tight” but added that the study “would act as a guide for further talks on how to improve open enrollment” (Whaley, 2000).

One week later, on December 8 (Corley, 2000), a letter to the editor titled “Many Factors Point to ‘White Flight’” appeared in which the author, another researcher at the local university, attacked the earlier guest opinion as both “inflammatory and uninformed” and argued that the CU study was flawed in its conclusion regarding the cause of increased stratification. He argued that other factors (dual-immersion programs and skyrocketing housing prices), not open enrollment, were responsible for White flight. Interestingly, this individual had attended an informal presentation at the university where the study findings were discussed but chose not to raise his specific criticisms at that time. Had he simply asked, we could have shown him how the data contradicted his interpretation. As it turned out, this was one of only a few instances in which any of the study’s conclusions were criticized as not warranted by the data. Controversy centered much more on the warrant and feasibility of the study’s recommendations.

The final three local articles ran approximately 1 month later in January and early February. On January 14 (Howe & Eisenhart, 2001), Howe and Eisenhart published a lengthy summary of the study’s findings and recommendations in a Sunday edition. The article began with a summary of claims made both by proponents and critics of school choice and noted that “our findings provide more support for the critics. . . . However . . . the open enrollment system would be less subject to criticism if it were reformed in certain ways, for example by implementing free transportation, abolishing special admissions preferences, and better balancing the ethnic/racial makeup of schools.” The remainder of the article summarized the study findings and recommendations in detail.

The following week, a Sunday front-page feature article titled "Schools: Choosing or Losing?" appeared, noting that the recent CU study described Boulder Valley School District as "'riddled with inequities' that are making white schools whiter, rich schools richer and poor schools poorer." It appealed to the study to suggest that without changes in transportation and funding, open enrollment would not be a "free-choice system but a means of widening socio-economic and racial divides among schools." It noted that the school board had only implemented one recommendation: centralization of enrollment processes. It then provided a full-page in-depth discussion of skimming, White flight, unfair competition between schools in recruiting, and whether the increasing emphasis on test scores was a good thing. The article concluded by again observing that the only recommendation to be implemented so far "has been to move the application process to one office" but that the board would be discussing the other recommendations throughout the upcoming year. The article ended with the school board president's assurance that the district is "committed to making sure there is equity in Boulder Valley" (Mattern, 2001).

Two weeks later, on February 4 (deKieffer, 2001), a guest commentary entitled "Rich School, Poor School" responded to the Howe and Eisenhart article (Howe and Eisenhart, 2001). The author agreed with much of the study but criticized some of its recommendations regarding what to do about inequitable funding, especially in regard to voluntary gifts by parents. The author noted that spreading the funding across the district would reduce the amount that parents are willing to give, lowering the total dollar amount given to schools. She called for more standardized reporting requirements for fundraising and concluded by asserting that through "educating and supporting those that cannot/will not raise funds, we can go a long way toward bettering our system and helping all of our children."

In November 2001 (Bounds, 2001), a year after the study release and as another year of open enrollment began, the *Daily Camera* printed a follow-up article titled "Addressing Open Enrollment: Procedure Changes, but Stratification Persists." The article opened observing that although the district had revamped open enrollment last year, "the core issue of schools stratified by income and ethnicity is proving more challenging than simply changing a policy." The article noted that "the district has made several changes in response to a University of Colorado study . . . including centralizing the process to create a more level playing field for Boulder Valley's 57 schools," but despite this, a "concentration of low-income and minority students at a handful of schools" still exists. It then highlighted several of the recommendations made by the choice study, particularly the recommendations to provide transportation to low socioeconomic students and to equalize the fundraising revenue among schools. The article mentioned that the school board had allocated additional teachers to elementary



schools with high percentages of second-language and low-income students, but “otherwise did not provide more money to those schools—largely because that would mean taking away money from others.” It concluded by mentioning that the board would be conducting upcoming discussions about changes related to fundraising and school boundaries.

#### THE PUBLIC’S RESPONSE

Other than the press coverage and guest editorials, the public response to the study was mild. In interviews, most board members reported receiving only a few calls from their constituents regarding the study, some challenging it and some supporting it with an “I told you so.” The study, however, was used twice in arguments made by two groups that were attempting to influence Boulder Valley decision making, one on each side of the open enrollment controversy. A group representing one of Boulder Valley’s college preparatory charter schools launched an ad hominem attack on Howe at a state school board meeting where they were appealing the Boulder Valley’s refusal to agree to some of their charter renewal demands, including a significant expansion of their enrollment. Howe was accused of having a predisposition against school choice, as evidenced by arguments critical of school choice that he had advanced in a book he published several years prior to the open enrollment study (Howe, 1997). (The group photocopied quotations from the book and included them in the formal material submitted to the state board.) Given Howe’s views, the charter school group alleged, the open enrollment study was biased against charter schools from the outset, and so was Boulder Valley for using it in their decision making. The state school board, which is typically highly supportive of charter schools, was unconvinced and upheld Boulder Valley’s decision.

On the other side, one group used the study positively to support its reform proposal. In a January 2001 presentation to the Boulder Valley school board, the Lafayette Quality Schools Council, an organization composed of parents, teachers, and principals attempting to improve the quality and perception of schools in Lafayette (a predominantly Latino community), used the analysis and recommendations of the study to argue for increased funding for schools with certain profiles, including high-ESL and free and reduced lunch percentages. The board ultimately voted to allocate more teachers to elementary schools with the highest percentages of second-language and low-income students.

#### THE IMPACT ON THE BOULDER VALLEY POLICYMAKERS

Generally speaking, the Boulder Valley school board and district personnel lauded the comprehensiveness, methodological rigor, and even-handedness

of the study, although they expressed some reservations about the choice study's conclusions about inequities in funding. Some members of the school board became aware of certain procedures and outcomes of the open enrollment system for the first time and were disconcerted about the inequities that had been documented. Other officials noted that they now had data to confirm what they already suspected. As one put it, the data "helped us frame the way we look at choice and put a face to our intuition." Some, however, worried that, precisely because they had known about the bad effects of open enrollment all along, nothing much would change.

District officials used the study to influence policy in a number of ways. Specifically, district officials noted that the choice study provided the necessary data to both prompt and justify the district's move to centralize the open enrollment process. At times, they attempted to distance this recommendation from the study (as in the case of the community meetings), and at other times, they enlisted the study as support for the centralization proposal. In interviews, district staff and school board members reported that the data provided a shield from criticism and attack, particularly from charter schools that hotly contested the centralization process.

In response to other recommendations of the choice study beyond centralization, the district improved its dissemination of information about choice to parents. All information on open enrollment is now translated and available in Spanish. Announcements about open enrollment and the availability of translated materials are included in parent newsletters and flyers distributed by the schools. Contrary to the recommendation of the choice study, however, open enrollment applications and packets are not sent to each home. District staff concluded that this would be too expensive. They also expressed the concern that, although this might improve access to low-income or non-English-speaking parents, it would be self-defeating if it also increased open enrollment among more affluent parents. In addition to improved availability of information, the district also removed restrictions on how neighborhood schools recruit for open enrollment—they had been confined to their attendance areas, whereas choice schools had no restrictions—in an effort to allow neighborhood schools suffering from negative perceptions more freedom to promote themselves.

Second, the district undertook a study of the cost that would be incurred by providing free transportation to all students who wished to take advantage of choice but determined that it too would be too expensive. They also worried that those parents already open enrolling or parents who don't need it would be the ones who would most benefit.

A few district officials noted that it was often difficult to address some of the more controversial issues raised by the study. They attributed this partly to the contentious nature of issues like stratification, skimming, and funding inequities. One district official noted that no one wants to be the one to tell

parents that they cannot contribute to their child's school or that we are going to take that money and give it to another school. She added that such a recommendation was just not realistic. District personnel also said that these issues were more difficult to discuss than centralization because, at the time of the study, the district lacked the centralized databases needed to assemble irrefutable data. Some felt that this left the data vulnerable to attack (though the data never were, in fact, questioned).

Interestingly, stratification, skimming, and fundraising, the issues that the school district found most difficult to address, were the very issues highlighted by the press. Community forums and face-to-face discussions with district personnel focused on the merits of centralization and increasing access to information on open enrollment, while direct discussions of White flight and overt inequities remained relatively invisible. Meanwhile, a parallel discussion of these more contentious issues was being indirectly debated through press coverage, guest editorials, and letters to the editor. Perhaps, then, the more subdued initial conversations around centralization, along with the press coverage of more controversial topics, might have functioned in tandem to push the eventual deliberation and policy change further than it might have otherwise proceeded. And in fact, the school board recently voted to refuse to approve any more charter school applications. In interviews, district officials noted that the CU study, particularly the finding that charter schools exacerbate racial and income stratification, was a key factor in the discussion and eventual decision to place a cap on charter schools.

This raises important questions for future investigation concerning what counts as deliberation in deliberative democratic evaluation and what kinds of dialogue are most effective in which contexts. The press has often been taken to task for ignoring the public good and fostering its own bottom line by seeking out the most scandalous and tantalizing facts and information. As such, it is often blamed for polarizing communities and escalating conflict when it comes to hotly contested issues (McNergney, 1992). Certainly, at times this seemed to be the case regarding the reporting and editorializing about Boulder Valley's open enrollment system, at least from the perspective of district officials. But the situation was more complicated than this; the press also provided an important forum in which citizens could air concerns and conflicts sparked by the study, concerns and conflicts that they initially felt less comfortable airing or didn't have the opportunity to air in other arenas of public deliberation. As noted earlier, several newspaper articles provided relatively detailed accounts of the study findings and in-depth discussions of what was meant by skimming, White flight, and unfair competition. Community members could read and digest this information regarding the public debate in the privacy of their own homes and on their own time. Perhaps then the press served as a powerful tool for priming the

community for face-to-face discussions of the more controversial recommendations, discussions that would have been too heated and unproductive at the outset.

On the other hand, one might ask if the public deliberation conducted in the press would have been as influential had the school board and district personnel been composed of a majority of proponents of school choice. From the outset, before the study began, a majority of board members and a number of district personnel were disturbed by what they believed the effects of choice to be. As noted earlier, once the study was complete, some district personnel saw it as hard evidence to support what they had already suspected. Likewise, in interviews, district personnel indicated that they knew that centralization and improved access to open enrollment information would be the least controversial issues. In part, then, not overtly discussing the study in the community meetings and beginning instead with centralization was a strategic move by district personnel.

#### CONCLUSION: SUCCESSES AND LIMITATIONS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC EVALUATION

The deliberative democratic approach produced a number of successes with respect to prompting policy change. The recommendation to centralize open enrollment was fully implemented and, as a part of this, so was the recommendation to eliminate the requirement for parents to visit schools in which they might wish to open enroll their children. The recommendation that a full packet of information, including open enrollment application materials, should be sent to all parents in a language that they understand was partially implemented, as was the recommendation that the Boulder Valley funding formula be adjusted for the percentage of low-income students enrolled in a given school. The recommendation to address stratification by race/ethnicity and income was partially implemented with a cap on charter schools, which also has implications for mitigating inequities in funding. The recommendation to make open enrollment procedures and requirements consistent across schools was partially implemented by removing certain restrictions on recruitment from neighborhood schools.

The two recommendations not implemented in any form were providing free transportation and redistributing fundraising dollars among Boulder Valley schools. But neither recommendation was ignored. A district study indicated that free transportation would be too expensive, particularly because Boulder Valley covers such a large geographic region. Although the idea of redistributing fundraising dollars never got off the ground, Boulder Valley did sponsor a special districtwide fundraiser in 2001, the proceeds of which were earmarked for the district's neediest schools.

We attribute these successes in influencing policy to our implementation of the principles of inclusion and dialogue, in which we engaged a representative group of the major stakeholders—primarily parents, teachers, and principals—in dialogue about the pros and cons of Boulder Valley’s open enrollment system. This permitted the findings and recommendations to be grounded in the beliefs and interests of those with firsthand experiences of the open enrollment system. Furthermore, those who disagreed with the findings or recommendations could not claim to have had their views excluded—and, in point of fact, they did not.

The evaluation also raised important questions about deliberative democratic evaluation. The general lesson for the deliberative democratic ideal is that democratic forums quite beyond the purview and control of evaluators influence the quality of public deliberation about education policies; the local press provides a case in point. Face-to-face deliberations with stakeholders proved unworkable both because of logistics and because of the political climate surrounding school choice. Deliberation came only later, it was not structured to help render stakeholders free and equal, and the evaluators were rarely involved in it directly. In this way, the principle of deliberation was detached from the principles of inclusion and dialogue. The evaluation’s role in deliberation about the open enrollment policy was largely limited to providing critical analysis via the evaluation report, itself grounded in inclusion and dialogue, which then served as grist for the mill of public deliberation. It is unlikely that, except in situations involving very small evaluations or very large amounts of available resources (including time), the role of evaluation in deliberations about educational policies can avoid this limitation.

What does this mean for the ideal of deliberative democratic evaluation? One response is that the deliberative democratic ideal is irrelevant because it cannot be put into practice. But this seems premature. Another response is to embrace the idea that the theory and practice of deliberative democratic evaluation need to be further worked out through a back-and-forth adjustment of the two, where individual cases serve to test the theory and provide guidance in how it should be revised. Rawls (1971) calls this general method *reflective equilibrium*, and it, or something closely akin to it, has been adopted by several prominent theorists of deliberative democracy (see, for example, Cohen 1999; Gutmann, 1987; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

The Boulder evaluation drives home the point that deliberative democratic evaluation cannot be a democratic practice unto itself. Rather, it must be seen as contributing to deliberations carried out by other democratic bodies—a school board, in this case. It does not follow that evaluations should simply gather the information sought by the powers that be and feed it into democratic bodies, however. Evaluations must observe the principles

of inclusion and dialogue in gathering information if they are to provide the grist for genuine democratic deliberation.

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### Notes

1 See Cousins and Whitmore (1998) for a general discussion of participatory models of evaluation. For a fuller defense of deliberative democratic evaluation than that provided here, see House and Howe (1999). For a critical exchange on deliberative democratic evaluation, see Ryan and DeStefano (2000).

2 A weaker stance—arguably, the dominant stance in program evaluation—assumes an “emotive” conception of democratic decision making (House & Howe, 1999). In this view, evaluators investigate means (facts) associated with the various ends (values) that are expressed by stakeholders. Ends (Xs) and means (Ys) are combined to form “value summaries” (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1995), which have the following general form: “If X is important to you, then evaluand Y is good for the following reasons” (Shadish et al., p. 101). Instances of this general formula might include, “If equality (X) is important to you, then detracking (Y) is good for the following reasons,” and “If economic efficiency (X) is important to you, then school choice (Y) is good for the following reasons.” Evaluators are precluded from making any judgment about the merits of the Xs—the ends or values—on the grounds that such judgments are “prescriptive,” whereas only “descriptive” claims are within the legitimate purview of evaluators. The emotive conception may be criticized on a number of grounds, including that its fundamental distinction between description and prescriptive is untenable (see House & Howe). Moreover, because it takes the critical examination of ends (values) off the table, it advantages those who hold majority values (however unreflectively) and those who possess the most power to *market* their views (Howe, 2002). Feeding “value summaries” into the now prevailing conditions of political decision making and letting the chips fall where they may not only fails to mitigate power imbalances, but it also likely fortifies them by rationalizing the process as participatory.

3 One prominent evaluation approach—the “constructivist” approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1989)—embraces elucidating dialogue as the means by which to foster equality among stakeholders. Critical dialogue is avoided in this approach on the grounds that attempting to establish “which view is right,” the ultimate aim of critical dialogue, is rooted in positivism and is “inappropriate.” Paradoxically, constructivist evaluation fails to mitigate, if it does not actually exacerbate, *inequality* among stakeholders. It focuses exclusively on eliminating the possibility of bias and the abuse of power on the part of evaluators by limiting their role to that of mere facilitators who must never challenge participants’ views and who must eschew expert knowledge. It thus creates a void that may be filled by powerful—and biased—stakeholders (e.g., Chelimsky, 1998; House & Howe, 1999).

4 This section is adapted from Howe and Eisenhart (2000).

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KENNETH R. HOWE is associate dean for graduate studies and director of the Education and the Public Interest Center, School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder. He specializes in philosophy of education, research methodology, and evaluation and policy analysis. Recent publications include *Values in Evaluation and Social Research* (with E. House) and *Closing Methodological Divides: Toward Democratic Educational Research*.

CATHERINE ASHCRAFT is an assistant professor of multicultural education at Western Washington University. Her research focuses on the discursive practices that construct gender, race, and class in formal and informal educational contexts, particularly in terms of sexuality, violence, and the implications for adolescent identities. Recent publications include “It’s Just Semantics: Investigating a School District’s Decision to *Respect* or *Value Diversity*” in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and “Adolescent Ambiguities in *American Pie*: Popular Culture as Resource for Sex Education” in *Youth & Society*.