PS1 for 5/26/88#MINNESOTA CHOOSE-A-SCHOOL PLAN

Minnesota is causing tremors in the public school establishment by giving parents the option to choose another public school anywhere in the state. Governor Rudy Perpich is confident that ''market forces'' will improve his state's public schools, and he could be right. The plan certainly is worth a try.

The plan carries a strong financial sting. State aid of up to $3,600 per student will follow each pupil to the new school of his parents' choice. That money will be lost to the school the student leaves.

The choose-a-school plan is bitterly opposed by the Minnesota Federation of Teachers (which has sued the state) and the Minnesota School Boards Association. The National Education Association (NEA) is on record against freedom of choice, but the National Governors Association in August 1986 adopted a report that said, ''You can increase excellence by increasing choice.''

Choose-a-school is also beginning to be supported by businessmen. Xerox Corporation CEO David T. Kearns has been urging choice as a means of allowing competition to raise academic standards, and he reiterates this position in his forthcoming book called ''Winning the Brain Race: A Bold Plan to Make Our Schools Competitive.''

When Secretary of Education William J. Bennett recently made his status report on American schools, five years after the publication of (BF)A Nation at Risk(end BF), he said, ''Choice within the public system has now become an idea that I think most people agree to.'' Bennett has been touting the notion of ''choice'' ever since he was appointed head of the Department of Education and announced that the hallmark of his tenure would be an emphasis on the ''three C's'': parental choice, character education, and curriculum content.

The politicians are apparently beginning to discover the

groundswell of public support for choice which the 19th Annual Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools reported some months ago. That nationwide survey found that 7 out of 10 Americans believe that parents should be able to choose which public school their children attend.

Among parents whose children actually attend public schools, support for this right of choice is even higher (76%).

The survey showed that the majority (51%) of public school parents feel that parents should have more say about the courses offered. Four out of 10 public school parents also feel they should have more say about instructional material used and the selection of books placed in school libraries.

Three-fourths of public school parents, as well as three-fourths of the public, feel that increasing the number of required courses in basic subjects would improve the quality of schools. The majority of the public (58%) feel that public elementary schools do not give enough attention to reading, writing and arithmetic.

The predisposition of the American people toward choice in education extends to specific courses. By 43% to 36%, the public favors ''character education'' courses in the schools as opposed to leaving this subject solely to parents and churches.

But the public also feels that parents should have the most influence on the content of ''character'' courses. Only 14% feel that teachers should have the most influence.

Furthermore, by a 5 to 3 margin, the public favors excusing pupils from ''character'' classes if their parents request it. The idea of excusing pupils from classes as a result of parental objections is generally opposed by the NEA.

By a majority of 68% to 26%, the public favors a proposed amendment allowing school prayer, and 71% believe that this would

offend only a small percentage of people.

The public appears to have a natural distrust of the Federal Government when it comes to schools. Public school parents split evenly on whether the Federal Government should have more or less influence on local public schools. By a slight margin (42% to 40%), parents of public school pupils say a federal Department of Education is not needed at all.

Since the Department of Education was established in 1980, it has spent more than $100 billion. If that's not enough to convince the American people that the Department is needed, then it should be a prime target for budget-cutting.