

EDUCATIONAL CHOICE FOR ALBERTANS

History and implications



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The responsibility for education has been delegated to each of the provinces through the provisions of the *British North America Act*. Although the administration of education falls clearly within the legislative authority of each province, federal statutes such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* provide some overriding principles that must be taken into consideration in the delivery of educational programs and services.

In Alberta, the province is responsible to ensure that:

1. every child is provided with a satisfactory educational program in accordance with its needs;
2. individual rights and freedoms identified in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act* are provided for and not infringed upon; and
3. the wishes and expectations of Albertans are met.

The province has created school boards, as well as other agents, to provide educational programs to students in accordance with provincial requirements and standards. The introduction and extension of educational choice has placed a burden upon school boards not only in terms of the manner in which they use the resources available to them but also in matters of governance, the establishment of priorities and the relationships among school authorities as well. It is clear that parental choice in the selection of educational programs and opportunities for their children is highly valued by Albertans and provided for in existing legislation. In the Preamble to the current *School Act* the following statement occurs:

WHEREAS parents have a right and a responsibility to make decisions respecting the education of their children;

Since its very early beginnings, the province has continued to respond to the wish of its residents to be able to choose those educational programs and services for their children that they feel best meet the needs of the child and are within the values and beliefs of the individual and the family. At the present time, school boards are

responsible to ensure that each one of its resident students has the opportunity to access an educational program that is consistent with the *School Act* and the regulations. However, the decision as to whether or not the services provided by the board will be accessed resides in the hands of the parent. School boards do not have the authority to require its resident students to access the programs and services it provides. In many ways it has become a “buyer’s market”. School boards and other educational agents are forced into competition with each other for students if they are to remain viable.

The fact that choice is strongly supported by the majority of Alberta residents is based upon a number of the following considerations:

1. It has long been recognized that all students do not learn at the same pace, in the same manner, or with the same materials and approaches. That there are individual differences among students is not in dispute and these must be accommodated within the provincial educational system.
2. Family and individual values and beliefs vary significantly throughout the population and educational programs and environments must respond to these or at least be compatible with them.
3. Families have a desire to ensure that each child receives an educational program that addresses its needs. In order to see that this occurs, families wish to be in a position to make choices and have some determination in what is best for their children and themselves.
4. Federal legislation, such as *the Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, provides for language and religious rights for those that wish to access them.
5. As the general population has become increasingly affluent, articulate and more attuned to different educational approaches, the desire and the ability to demand a range of educational opportunities has increased.
6. The province has the financial resources to provide educational authorities with the means to offer educational services and programs desired by population.
7. The growth in population has brought together a larger diverse group of individuals with differing views and beliefs. These must be accommodated within the educational system.

8. Changes in technology and ease of communication and travel have permitted a greater range of access to, and delivery of, educational programs and services.
9. Governments wishing to remain in power – and that is basic to the political process – must be responsive to the desires of their constituents. Therefore the provincial government will continue to respond to demands of parents, pressure groups and influential individuals for increased opportunities to influence the educational system.
10. Changes in provincial funding and the removal of school board access to the power of taxation have enabled parents to take advantage of the wide range of choices and opportunities available across the province.

The ability to choose is fundamental to, and the basis for, a vibrant society. As George Eliot notes in *Daniel Deronda* (bk.VI, ch. XLII):

The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice.

While opportunities exist for private schools and programs, the vast majority of provincial students attend public schools. Information provided by Alberta Education for the past school year illustrates the following:

Number of students enrolled:

Public schools	=	411,502
Separate schools	=	133,429
Francophone	=	5,393
Charter	=	6,779
Total as Public	=	557,103
ECS Private Operator	=	3,027
Private Schools	=	26,136
Federal Schools	=	8,396
Provincial	=	1,836
Total as Private	=	39,395
Total Provincial Enrollment	=	596,498

*2007 – 2008 Preliminary Alberta Education
EIS 1004 May 2008*

Excluding federal and provincial students as being the result of a special circumstance, the above-noted data indicates that in excess of 95% of Alberta students are enrolled in what may be defined as public schools.

Changes to the educational system or to any other public endeavor in a democracy do not come quickly but evolve over long periods of time. The system that exists in Alberta today with its emphasis on choice and diversity does so because that is what the majority of Albertans want and are prepared to support. Members of the provincial government are the elected representatives of the people and, if they wish to be re-elected, they must respond to the wishes of the majority or to what the majority is at least prepared to tolerate.

In the brief historical review that has been provided, the nature of the evolution in choice has been clearly identified. The first schools in the province were charged with the responsibility of providing a basic and well-defined educational program to children in the vicinity of the school. As the population of the province grew, choice was extended to those of the minority of either the Roman Catholic or Protestant faith. The choice was given to the members of the minority faith community and not to the individuals within it. Once the members of the faith community made the decision to exercise their choice, all those of the faith were legally bound to support it financially, morally and as the educational choice of their children. This is not the nature of parental choice today, which is an individual choice and not dependent upon the members of a group.

There has been a significant change in the manner of governance, the responsibility of elected school trustees, and the necessary response to pressures for a wider range of educational opportunities. As funding is based primarily upon the number of enrolled students, school boards are required to attract students to their schools if they are to remain viable. Competition for students has demanded that school boards and other educational providers meet the wishes of students and parents for access to educational services and programs that meet their needs. History has shown that the public education system has been very successful in meeting the demands for a wide range of educational opportunities, with some 95% of the student population enrolled in it.

INTRODUCTION

A dictionary definition of choice provides the following:

- *the right, power, or chance to choose, options;*
- *a variety from which to choose*

The definition is certainly descriptive of the Alberta educational environment. Parents, and independent students, are provided with the right to choose from a wide variety of acceptable educational programs and services being provided by school boards and other agents that have been approved by the provincial government. It is generally believed, and accepted by a majority of the public, that choice is a “*good thing*”.

Parental and student choice is viewed as being a fundamental cornerstone of the Alberta educational structure. As noted in the Alberta Education document entitled, *School Choice*:

When it comes to selecting a school, parents and students can choose from a wide range of options. They can select from public school, Catholic schools, francophone schools, private schools, and charter schools. They can also access a number of unique and innovative programs – including home education, online/virtual schools, outreach programs and alternative programs. Parents can also opt to home school their children. Choice is one of the important principles Alberta’s educational system is built on.

Alberta’s Commission on Learning, October 2003, made the following comment:

A strong public education system must continue to be a cornerstone of Alberta’s society. The public education system should continue to be first choice for the majority of Alberta’s students and their parents. At the same time, diversity and choice are positive features and add to the strength of the education system. Students should be able to choose different pathways and different ways of learning. Choices should continue to be available within and among public and separate schools, francophone schools, charter schools, private schools, alternative programs, distance learning, and home schooling. The only proviso is that the range of options outside of the public

system should not become so extensive that it detracts from the core of a strong public education system, willing and able to serve all students.

School choice is cherished and recognized as a key component of the province's educational system but, as emphasized in the Alberta's Commission on Learning, it is important that choice continue to be provided largely through the public education system. The public system must continue to be the foremost choice of the majority of students and their parents. While the Commission recognized that alternatives are available outside of the public system, it cautioned against extending the range of options provided through other avenues if the impact upon the public system was to become negative. The public education system must be responsive to the wishes of Alberta parents and students to be able to choose from a range of alternatives they deem best serve their needs. This does place significant pressure upon the resources available to school boards if they are to be in a position to respond to the demands placed upon them and the competition from other educational service providers.

The provincial government is required to accommodate the desire of parents and other constituents for a wide range of educational opportunities if it wishes to retain public support. In order to become elected and serve the needs of the public, government members must be sensitive to, and be receptive of, the views and needs of the various interest groups. Therefore, the government's response to the pressures of influential interest groups and constituents for alternatives in educational opportunities for their children has been to provide a range of choices that are both educationally sound and politically acceptable. As Justice J. Wilson, Alberta Court of Appeal, writing in the case of "*Thomas Larry Jones vs. Her Majesty the Queen*, October 9, 1986":

The Act (School Act) is a flexible piece of legislation which seeks only to ensure that all children in public or private schools, at home or elsewhere, receive an adequate education.

BACKGROUND

1. Early Period (1800 – 1904)

All of the schools that were originally established in the portion of the Northwest Territories that became the province of Alberta were private schools operated by a variety of religious groups. The first missionaries to establish church missions or private religious schools were the Catholics and the Methodists. Their major purposes were the teaching of religion and the promotion of fluency in English to the aboriginal inhabitants of the area. Beginning in 1862, schools were also established to provide educational programs to children whose parents were employees of the Hudson's Bay Company or other agencies located in the various communities.

The Northwest Territories Act of 1875 provided for separate schools to be established throughout the territories as they existed in Ontario and Quebec. However, due to the limited number of students available and the sparse population of the area, this provision was not utilized.

In 1884, a public school system was established in Alberta under the provisions provided through the Northwest Ordinance. Under the provisions of the Ordinance, the government became responsible for education in the Northwest Territories. During the years 1884 – 1886, several public schools were organized. The legislation provided for the election of school trustees and provided the school district with the power to tax its residents in order to operate the school. With the union of the territorial government, and later the provincial government, and the local school board, there became an increased responsiveness to the wishes and desires of the parents and other constituents for an effective educational system.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1892 made provisions for a single public school system with a provision for separate schools. Through this provision, choice was provided to adherents of either the Protestant or Catholic faith to have their children educated in schools governed and operated by members of that faith. It is significant to note that the choice was not extended to individual parents but was, in fact, given to the entire faith community. The scope of the choice was clearly defined, limited and the responsibilities of the community were identified.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1901 defined the procedure for establishing separate school districts and clarified the responsibility for the financial support of such school districts. Section 41 of the Ordinance reads as follows:

41. The minority of the ratepayers in any district whether Protestant or Roman Catholic may establish a separate school therein; and in such case the ratepayers establishing such Protestant or Roman Catholic separate school shall be liable only to assessments of such rates as they impose upon themselves in respect thereof.

The Ordinance restricted the right to make the decision of whether or not to establish a separate school to the majority of ratepayers that were of the minority faith. Once a separate school was established, parents that were of that faith were legally obligated to send their children to that school, and the ratepayers to financially support it.

2. The *Alberta Act 1905*

In 1905, the responsibility for education was transferred to the newly formed province of Alberta through the inclusion of altered provisions of Section 93 of the *British North America Act* into Section 17 of the *Alberta Act*. A portion of the altered section added the following provision to the *Alberta Act*:

(1) nothing in any such law shall prejudicially affect any right or privilege with respect to separate schools which any class of persons have at the date of the passing of this Act under the terms of Chapters 29 and 30 of the Ordinances of the Northwest Territories, passed in the year 1901, or with respect to religious instruction in any public or separate school as provided for in the said ordinances;

This addition provided separate schools with the rights and privileges that existed in the area prior to 1905. Roman Catholics or Protestants, whichever faith was in the minority, could decide to operate their own schools and provide religious instruction to students. It also provided for the need of such schools to follow provincial standards in curriculum, the training and certification of teachers, and

the inspection of schools. In this way, choice was provided through the public system for those of the religious minority to provide religious instruction within provincial requirements. This arrangement is essentially in place to the present time.

3. Bill 29 – Public Funding For Private Schools

Alberta was the second province in Canada to provide direct grants to private schools. Order in Council 864/68 provided for the sum of \$100 per full time student enrolled in a private school for the 1967 – 68 school year to be paid to the operators of such schools. However the decision to provide funding to private schools was not reached without a great deal of debate and pressure from a number of influential interest groups and individuals that either supported or were opposed to the decision.

Beginning in the 1950's, demand began to be placed upon the provincial government to provide public funding for denominational private schools. Digout, in his unpublished thesis dealing with funding to private schools, noted that the Association of Private Schools and Colleges in Alberta, the Christian Action Foundation, and the Societies for Christian Education were responsible for most of that pressure.

In March of 1962, a Bill was introduced into the Alberta Legislature that proposed that the same grants as were provided to public schools be provided to private schools. The Bill was defeated, but the support for public funding to private schools was given a political voice, a platform and place upon the provincial agenda.

Bill 29 was passed in 1968 and provided the legal basis for public funding for private schools. Order in Council 864/68, as noted above, provided for a sum of \$100.00 for each full time student enrolled in a private school. While the amount of funding was significantly less than what was proposed in 1962, the principle was established and the amount left to the Legislature to determine on an annual basis.

It should be noted there were a variety of private schools in operation prior to the passage of Bill 29, which provided public funding to private schools. There were a number of private schools that were established by parents and societies to provide for the educational needs of handicapped children at a time when public school authorities provided limited educational opportunities. It is worth noting that these private schools arose largely because public school authorities were unwilling to make the provision of educational services to handicapped children a goal. Some funding was provided to these schools for reading and other instructional materials. At the present time, it should be noted that most, if not all, of these schools have now been included in the public system.

The greatest growth during the period 1950 – 1975 in the private school sector were denominational schools, particularly those affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, which started its first school in 1945 with 26 pupils and by 1979 had approximately 2500 students in 13 schools.

A quote attributed to A. Aalborg in the Alberta Legislature by Digout in his study of public aid to private schools provided the government's rationale for public funding for private schools:

A democratic society must provide all parents with the right to send their children to public schools. It must also provide parents who are dissatisfied with the public system to choose an alternative means of educating their children.

The decision to provide public funding to private schools caused considerable concern and opposition among a variety of interest groups. As a result, numerous studies and public consultations were undertaken to assess the impact upon the public system and to exercise some provincial control over the numerous private schools springing up in the province. In 1978, the Minister established four categories of private schools.

Category 1 – those schools that provided educational programs to students within provincial requirements dealing with curriculum, teacher qualifications and examinations.

Category 2 – those schools that provided educational programs to handicapped students that required additional assistance and support.

Category 3 – those schools that provided instruction in a particular language. These schools operated outside of the regular school hours and were provided by various private groups and societies.

Category 4 – those schools that provided educational programs using an approved curriculum, but did not need to adhere to provincial requirements regarding teacher qualifications or examinations.

Category 3 and 4 schools were not provided with any provincial financial support.

Funding to private schools continued to experience increases from 1968 to the present. At one time a target of 60% of the per pupil grant that was provided to public schools would be given to private schools. The province has recently stated that financial support for private schools will be again increased and that support for capital facilities might be a consideration. Opposition has been triggered to this announcement by a number of agencies providing education in the public system. The effect of the increased funding to private schools upon the public system should be monitored on a number of metrics such as: changes in student enrollment, number of private schools in the province, and overall increases in funding over time.

It is possible that the impact of increased funding to private schools may not be as dramatic as first thought. Recently, many private schools have entered into agreements with public school authorities to become alternative programs within the public system and still be able to retain significant control over the important operational and management components of their schools. By entering into such arrangements, these schools are eligible to receive full public funding through the school board with which they have a contract. Therefore, unless the potential increases in the amount of funding to private schools are significant and approach full public funding, there would be little incentive for these schools to opt out of the current agreements. Those private school operators that might be enticed by increases in provincial funding would most likely be those that would, for one reason or another, not wish to enter into an arrangement with a public school

authority or have experienced some difficulty with the contractual arrangement or the working relationships between the groups involved. However, should funding approximate the same level as that of the public system, it might be of interest to find out how many of the current arrangements regarding the provision of alternative programs remain in place.

4. Home Education – 1970's

The opportunity for students to be educated at home has a long legislated history in the province. *The School Attendance Act of 1910, C 81 S.5* provided for students to be absent from school if, in the opinion of a school inspector as certified in writing, a child is under efficient instruction at home or elsewhere. This provision was originally designed to accommodate those families whose children would have experienced some difficulty accessing an educational program because of distance or availability in the region. However education at home or elsewhere soon became an important choice for parents during the 1970's for those that wished to shield their children from what was happening in the public schools.

Alberta Home Education Association was formed in 1986 by a group of parents who decided that educating their children at home was what they wanted to do. Many of the parents that wished to educate their children at home felt that the public schools were becoming too secularized and wished to provide an educational environment that was more compatible with family values and beliefs. While provincial legislation was permissive of home education, a number of school authorities were not helpful and many parents felt they were unable to get programs approved or the necessary pedagogical support they required. As a result, the concept of "the willing non-resident board" was born. Parents were able to select a school board anywhere in the province that was prepared to fulfill the requirements of the legislation. The right to supervise a home education program was extended to specific categories of private schools and current terminology refers to associate boards and associate private schools.

Today there are a number of associations and organizations that have been formed to provide support and assistance to parents and students enrolled in home education programs. Some of these are:

- The Home Education Exchange (thee) – a non-denominational Christian organization that exists to support and enrich the educational efforts of families that are exercising their God given responsibility to educate their children for life and eternity.
- The Centre for Learning@Home – a combination of Okotoks Home Schooling Services and St. Paul’s Academy.
- Roots’ Homeschooling – Roots’ mission is to support and encourage Christian parents in the Roots community as they home educate each of their children “in the way he should go” (Proverbs 22:6).
- Education Unlimited – A Vision for Home Education and Beyond – mission is to provide opportunity for parents to reclaim responsibility for the educational health and welfare of their children by supporting and encouraging them with our expertise in home education and beyond.
- WISDOM Home Schooling – is a willing non-resident home school board established for the sole purpose of administrating traditional home schooling, giving parents utmost control over what is taught to their children, as well as how and when it is taught.

The opportunity exists today for students to have their entire educational program provided by the parent in the home or to take a blended program that incorporates educational programs from a variety of sources and locations including attendance in a school. Information provided by Alberta Education stated that there were 7,524 students identified as being registered as home educated in the 2007 – 2008 school year. This continues to appeal to a rather small constituency.

5. Alternative Schools

The Calgary Board of Education introduced the concept of alternative schools into Alberta in 1976. The three schools established at that time were:

- Calgary Hebrew School
- I.L. Peretz School
- Logos Christian School

However, shortly after their establishment, opposition to the notion of alternative schools began to grow in some sectors of the Calgary community. “Save Public Education” (SPE) undertook to generate public opposition to the schools and to establish the mandate that the only role of the board was to provide public education. In the October election of 1983, a sufficient number of trustees were elected to the board to move closure of the three schools. All three schools continued to operate with one going private and the other two entering into an agreement and a contract with the Calgary Catholic Board.

It is difficult to judge the impact upon the Calgary system from the decision of the Board to close the door upon alternative schools. However, it would appear as if there has been some effect in that Calgary has a greater number of alternative educational opportunities outside of the public system than does any other urban centre in the province. Comparisons have been made between Edmonton and Calgary in assessing the number of private and public alternatives that are available in each of the metro areas.

It would appear that if parents and other community agencies are thwarted in their efforts to obtain the educational opportunities they desire through the established structures, they will find ways to get their wishes met. Hence in the City of Calgary, there are more charter schools and private schools than in other urban centres in the province. This may be, in part, due to the larger student numbers, the culture of the urban population, or the overall ethos of the community.

6. Francophone Schools – 1982

With the adoption in 1982 of Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the political and pedagogical issues of minority language education became an issue not only in Alberta but across Canada. Franco-Albertans began to move ahead with establishing French schools under their control within the province. École Heritage opened at Jean Côté in 1988 and was the first French School in a rural district.

In 1990, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the right of the language minority to govern its own schools. The *Mabe Judgment* set the stage for the provision of French language schools in the province governed by those individuals that qualified under Section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Alberta government responded with *Bill 8* in 1993, which recognized Francophone governance of some twenty-one schools. Three school boards were created along with three coordinating councils. The school boards were:

- Centre-Nord
- Nord- Ouest
- Nord- Est

Coordinating councils were established in Calgary, Lethbridge and Fort McMurray. At the present time, all Francophone schools are under the jurisdiction of one of the four Francophone Education Regions.

7. The 1988 *School Act*

The decade of the 1980's was a vibrant time. Many significant issues were being dealt with at both the national and provincial levels. For example, federally we saw the repatriation of the constitution, the *Constitution Act*, and the adoption of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Provincially, economic and educational issues were being dealt with. A teachers' strike in Calgary resulted in an examination of the educational system and the way it was financed, staffed and fulfilling its mandate. Pressure was rising for the expansion of private schools and home education. There was increased pressure for accountability measures and provincial examinations were given some support. Within this milieu, the *School Act* was revised and passed in 1988.

The revised *Act* provided significant choice to Alberta parents and students to access the educational programs and services they desired. In many ways, it set the stage for the vibrant and progressive system that Alberta has today. Some of the major changes were:

- a. Alternative programs were provided for. This section was inserted to provide school authorities with the legal avenue to expand program offerings should there be sufficient demand. It also permitted the jurisdiction with the opportunity to charge parents for any additional costs incurred in order to provide the program. It is believed that this was, in part, a response to the Calgary Board of Education decision to discontinue support for alternative schools as a result of pressure to adhere to what was believed to be a mandate to provide public education.

The ability of boards to provide alternative programs has had a much greater impact upon the educational environment in the past decade than might have been anticipated at the time of the legislation. It has provided the mechanism for school boards to enter into agreements with private schools and other agents to provide programs and to be able to claim the students as fully funded students of the board. It has also permitted the establishment of specialized schools that provide programs for select groups.

- b. Provisions for the establishment of Francophone authorities for the operation and governance of Francophone schools were established. The role and responsibility of the Francophone Regional Authorities was placed into the preamble to the *Act*.
- c. An appeal process and procedure was established for parents and others to follow when wishing to appeal decisions of a board to the Minister. This permitted an avenue for a challenge to a wide range of decisions of a board dealing with everything from student discipline to the provision of educational programs.
- d. The introduction of a Special Needs Tribunal was an attempt to ensure that students with severe disabilities were provided with an appropriate educational program and to assess which provincial authority was financially responsible
- e. The responsibilities of students, teachers and principals were identified and placed in legislation.
- f. School councils were established and a role for them was defined. This provided parents and members of the public with an opportunity to work with the principal and staff of the school to provide educational programs and services.

- g. In the Preamble to the *Act*, the right and responsibility of parents to make decisions respecting the education of the children was clearly stated.

Previous *School Acts* tended to deal more extensively with administrative matters but this was not the case with the revised *1988 School Act*.

8. Charter Schools – 1994

Bill 19, the *School Amendment Act*, passed on March 31, 1994 and with its proclamation on May 25, 1994 Alberta became the first province in Canada to provide for Charter Schools. Charter schools are in essence public schools but are not under the direct control of a publicly elected school board and its teachers are not full members of the *Alberta Teachers' Association*. The purpose of charter schools was to provide students and their parents with more choice in education to better serve their needs. It was hoped that the governance model would permit innovative educational practices to be provided to students in order to enhance student achievement. The legislation governing the approval of a charter school specified that the program to be provided could not already be offered in the jurisdiction where the school was to be located.

Those wishing to establish a charter school must first apply to the school board of the jurisdiction in which it is located to provide an alternative program. Should the board not respond positively to the request, then an application must be made to the Minister for approval to establish a charter school. The initial approval has a term of five years with an opportunity for renewal. The maximum number of charter schools that can be established in the province is limited to fifteen. There are twelve charter schools operating in the province at this time, providing a wide range of innovative programs and services. Six of the schools are located in Calgary, three in Edmonton, one in Medicine Hat, one in Sherwood Park and one at Wabamum.

9. Removal of the Power of Boards to Access the Local Tax Base

In January of 1994, the Minister of Education announced a new funding formula for public education in the province. Under the terms of the new funding framework, which would become effective for the 1995 – 96 school year, the

province would provide 100% of the funding. The ability of school boards to access the local tax base was eliminated. Funding would be primarily student driven and allocated in three large blocks which were Instruction, Support and Capital. The transfer of funds between blocks was restricted.

With the removal of the local tax base, school authorities were not permitted to charge tuition fees to non-resident students that wished to attend their schools should resources and space be available. The legislation also required a school authority to accept any student that wished to enroll in one of its programs if resources and space were available. The provincial funding following the student increased the level of competition for students not only among school authorities but among schools. This has resulted in a wider range of educational programs and services than might have otherwise been anticipated. For example, a school that was at risk of closure due to declining enrollment could choose to specialize and attract students from other areas that would not have normally attended that school. While there has been a reluctance to refer to the Alberta funding system as a voucher system, it does have many of the defining characteristics of one.

IMPLICATIONS

The ability to choose among desirable alternatives is fundamental to a vibrant and democratic society. The ability and opportunity for parents and students to choose the educational programs and services they wish has placed significant pressures on school boards and other educational providers. It has forced the educational system to be more responsive to the needs of the educational community. Innovation, marketing, competition and flexibility that were once not considered applicable to school authorities are now essential considerations and vital for success.

Some of the implications of choice are as follows:

1. Governance

- a. There has been a significant change in the nature of representation. Originally trustees were selected from the area in which the educational services were provided and they governed on behalf of the students and residents of the jurisdiction. However, many school boards now serve students that are non-resident and in some cases, serve students which reside outside of the province or the country. The parents of these students do not, and can not, vote for the trustees that govern the jurisdiction from which their children obtain their education. This raises a number of issues such as:
 - i. accountability
 - ii. participation in the electoral process
 - iii. who is the educational client
 - iv. what is the responsibility of the board and to whom
 - v. what is the responsibility of those members of the community that do not have children in school
- b. The members on governing bodies of a number of educational agents providing educational services and receiving provincial funding such as private and charter schools are not publicly elected. These authorities are not directly accountable to, nor elected by, members of the public. Who is responsible to ensure that the “public good” is taken into consideration?

- c. It is possible to serve as trustee on a school board and on the governing body of another educational agent at the same time. Does the potential for conflict exist?
- d. An individual could be elected as a trustee for a school jurisdiction and enroll their children in schools operated by another authority. A trustee is not required to support the jurisdiction by sending their children to the schools operated by it. Are there avenues for conflict and competing agendas?

2. Competition

School boards are not permitted to access the local tax base in order to raise funds for the provision of educational programs and services. Although Division 7 of the *School Act* does provide a mechanism for a board to levy a special tax, this provision has not proven to be of significant value. The revenue of a school board is primarily determined by the number of students enrolled in its schools. Therefore school boards are forced to compete with other educational service providers in order to attract students and increase enrollment. Competition has led to increased opportunities and choices for students such as:

- a. Specialized programs have been developed and provided such as sports, arts, gender-based, language, trades and academics. If specific programs are in demand, boards must either be prepared to provide them or see their student numbers decline.
- b. Marketing has increased and there has been a direct and targeted effort to attract students to specific schools and programs. Communication has increased between education providers and consumers. Efforts have been made to emphasize the positive features of jurisdiction programs.
- c. Transportation routes have been planned and implemented that enable students to access preferred programs.
- d. Schools that have experienced student enrollment loss and are at risk of closure have developed specialized programs designed to attract increased student numbers. Such action has had the effect of keeping some neighborhood schools open and providing programs and services that are viewed as being desirable.

- e. School calendars have been altered in some communities to account for parent and student preferences in accessing educational programs.

The above listing is not intended to be exhaustive of the wide range of choices and alternatives that exist in Alberta school jurisdictions. It is intended to show that school authorities have indeed been responsive to the wishes, needs and preferences of Albertans for choice and alternatives. While speculation is not always fruitful, it might be useful to wonder if the wide range of programs and services available to students today would have occurred if choice would have been much more difficult to access.

3. Risk

As noted previously, choice is viewed as being positive and a major contributor to the success of the educational system in Alberta today. There is little doubt that the availability and ease of choice has been positive. However, the competition it has encouraged has a number of risks associated with it, such as:

- a. The increased pressure faced by school boards to match programs that are provided by other providers has the potential to detract from the quality of programs already being provided. Dilution of educational quality could be an issue if the range of programs, particularly in smaller jurisdictions, becomes excessive.
- b. Boards may utilize resources to attract students that might be used for other purposes. For example, it has been reported that some boards are subsidizing transportation services in order to maintain student enrollment.
- c. If choice is left to the student and the parent, what is the accountability to the public? Albertans that do not have children in school have a direct interest in the educational system.
- d. Boards may enter into arrangements with other agents to provide programs in order to increase funding. Such arrangements must be carefully evaluated in terms of their educational and social merits.
- e. Boards may be forced into decisions which may not be in the best interests of the jurisdiction in order to maintain student numbers. An example might be an anticipated school closure in a small rural community. A board may

- continue to operate the school if it knows that an alternative may be established in the community.
- f. If boards are either unable, or unwilling, to meet the demands of groups of Albertans for access to specific educational programs and services, pressure will be placed upon the provincial government to ensure these are made available. Boards must continue to be responsive to the wishes of students and parents for choice.

SUMMARY

Alberta may well provide the widest range of choice to parents in selecting the educational programs for their children than any other province in Canada. For example, Alberta is the only province in Canada to provide for charter schools. However, as the study illustrates, choice has come slowly and the system has evolved in response to changing times and public pressure. Each opportunity has arisen because someone championed the cause and exerted the time and energy necessary to see it become a reality. The educational system exists the way it does today because that is what the majority of Albertans wish it to be.

At its historical beginning, the demands upon the educational system in the province were clear and the majority of parents were in agreement. Students were to learn the basic skills and prepare for the world of work. Communities were small and relatively homogeneous and shared reasonably similar values. This is not the case today and the educational system is required to accommodate a wide range of expectations.

The opportunities provided to students and parents to choose the kinds of educational programs and services they wish have forced school boards and other educational providers to be responsive and receptive to their requests.

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