

## **School Choice: setting the stage for a productive discussion**

School District No. 38 (Richmond)

September, 2001

This discussion paper has been prepared in response to Board Motion 182/2001, which referred the articles concerning the Edmonton School District in the May 2001 edition of *The School Administrator* to Education Committee for discussion and recommendation of a process through which the ideas presented in the articles might be considered. At Education Committee it was clarified that the intent of this motion was to consider the issue of school choice (rather than the school-based management which was also a major theme of the articles). Board Motion 242/2001 then asked staff to prepare “an Executive Summary providing an analysis of the points of view and clarifying the ideas and issues about school choice.”

This paper is intended to provide a foundation for further discussion by clarifying terms and questions, providing background information, and suggesting a process for broader discussion. There are four sections:

- What is meant by School Choice?
- What motivates proponents of increased school choice?
- What concerns opponents of increased school choice?
- How might the District proceed with its consideration of school choice?

### **What is meant by School Choice?**

Before entering into a discussion of school choice, it is important to be clear what is intended. The term is used in a wide variety of ways that might be thought of in terms of four basic clusters along a continuum of meanings.

Within the existing regular program, many parents/guardians would like to have more direct, *personal control* over the experience of their children, which they might express as a desire for more “choice.” Although it is not “school choice” as such, the wish to select a child’s teacher or to determine curriculum objectives, learning materials, instructional strategies or assessment techniques is a commonly heard desire which defines one end of the spectrum of school choice. Not only parents, but also students, sometimes express this wish. Students are permitted to select some of their courses in the later grades and the District strongly encourages teachers and schools to actively solicit meaningful student input, but in reality this is seldom achieved. There is also a fundamental commitment to professional autonomy for teachers (within the bounds of the prescribed and locally developed curriculum, and consistent with effective educational practice) which limits parents and students to indirect influence over the educational program that is provided to them. Foundations is intended to promote the strong home-school partnership that is universally understood to be desirable, and thus to enhance the responsiveness of the system and to improve student learning, while respecting the basic principle of professional autonomy and the associated obligation of teachers to adapt their practices to serve the best interests of their students.

In some cases school choice refers to *alternate programs* and services, either at the school or district level, which may be divided into those based on individual preference and those based on an objectively identified learning need. Existing programs and services based on need include all Learning Services (both school and district based) and district alternate programs such as Blundell Therapeutic and Educational Services, Richmond School Family and Children Services, Station Stretch, Landsdowne Alternate, Combined Studies (at Boyd and McNair), Pre-employment (at McNair and Richmond), and the Colt Daycare program (at Richmond). Courses and programs based on preference would include all elective courses in secondary schools, various school-based enrichment programs, approximately 100 Career Preparation programs, and district programs such as French Immersion (early and late), Montessori (at Garden City and Kilgour), Incentive (attached to McRoberts), International Baccalaureate (at Richmond) and the

adult and school-age supplementary programs offered through Continuing Education. Examples of other alternate programs that have been proposed in the past include Orton-Gillingham instruction for students with a learning disability in reading, gifted programs, a Fine Arts school and a Traditional School. Sometimes alternate district programs are proposed as options within a school and sometimes as the focus of an entire school, in which case the term “magnet school” has sometimes been used.

A third focus for advocates of school choice is *open boundaries* between schools, which would permit students to attend the school or program of their choice. Presently, the District establishes boundaries that define the school that students in a particular neighbourhood will attend in order to evenly distribute the student population amongst existing facilities. However, cross-boundary attendance is permitted on the basis of a priority order defined in District policy whenever there is additional space available in a school. Approximately 21% of elementary students and 19% of secondary students use this cross-boundary option to attend a school outside their neighbourhood.

A fourth meaning of school choice for some proponents is *vouchers* that would permit students to attend any public or private school in the province according to their choice and to receive full funding in that school. A related idea is *charter schools*, which would receive full public funding on the basis of student attendance but operate outside of the control of an elected school board under the governance of parents and without the requirement for teachers to be members of the BCTF. Both vouchers and charter schools would require changes to provincial legislation.

### **What motivates proponents of increased school choice?**

Each proponent of increased school choice will have his or her own reasons, but the various articles reviewed and past experiences of this discussion in the District suggest two broad categories of motivation.

*Individual Liberty:* The first is a claim to personal liberty. This is sometimes expressed as an aversion to the “monopoly” of the public school system, or even to restrictions imposed on personal choice by government in general. Such claims are often accompanied by a desire for more “accountability” on the part of the bureaucracy and individual teachers. Sometimes this claim to rights of personal preference for individual taxpayers are related to instructional content (including religious instruction), and at other times to teaching methods, disciplinary approaches or other matters of style. In most cases the fundamental claim to individual rights of choice is accompanied by a secondary belief that this will cause a higher level of parent support and involvement, and thus improve student learning.

*Market Forces:* The second category of motivation for increased student choice has a more direct focus on improving student learning through competition and market forces. This is based on the belief that the same marketplace dynamics that drive an open economy can be appropriately and effectively applied to education and other social enterprises. This, it is claimed, will result in increased creativity and productivity for all by weeding out ineffective schools, or alternatively by requiring them to improve, and by expanding successful schools and promoting successful practices. The freedom for individuals to choose their program or school is fundamental to this market-based approach. (For a full discussion of market-based approaches to publicly funded education see attached Appendix 1.)

### **What concerns opponents of increased school choice?**

Given adequate financial resources, few would argue with the desire for a wider array of courses and programs within all schools to meet individual interests and needs. On the other hand, most would see the virtue in a common core curriculum for all students to ensure that they receive a broad education and avoid premature specialization. Just how much should be prescribed and how much left to individual choice is, however, sometimes contentious. This long-standing issue is not central to the issue of school choice as it is currently being raised provincially and as it is discussed in the articles about the Edmonton School District. The focus seems to be on alternate programs and

schools that specialize in some way, thus reducing their internal range of choice but creating an identifiable alternative setting within the broader school system.

Charter schools and vouchers do not seem to be 'on the table' in BC at the moment and thus this paper focuses on the call for an array of alternative programs and schools with open boundaries and free choice of attendance by parents and students, as opposed to the existing system of comprehensive schools in every neighbourhood with standard curriculum, programs and services.

Opponents often comment that there is no need for such a change because the existing system works very well, having simultaneously raised both academic standards and retention significantly over the past several decades and giving BC very good results in international comparisons. They dispute claims that the school system is somehow failing and describe the crisis that some claim to exist as "manufactured" or "invented," either as a result of misinformation or hidden agenda. They also dispute the validity of a market-based approach to education because a market can only function effectively when there is well-informed choice and this is not the case, and is unlikely to be so because of the complexity of the issues involved. Some also object on moral grounds to the notion of "Social Darwinism" that underlies the market approach. These defensive reactions, whether valid or not, however, do not constitute an argument in favour of the status quo, but simply an argument against the proposed change.

Again, there are a host of arguments made for the public school system with the present basic structure and each individual will have his or her own priorities and perspectives, but the arguments may be thought of in two broad categories.

*Expertise:* First, there is the argument that public education is a complex affair and that the best interests of children, and the community, are served by bringing expertise to bear. Authority to operate the system is vested in elected officials, but qualified professionals are paid to pursue the democratically determined educational objectives and to determine each student's needs and the most effective program for addressing those needs. Thus, while interests and needs are both to be respected, it is professional assessment of needs that should determine a student's basic educational program and only secondarily the personal preferences of either the parent or the student.

*Social Capital:* The second category of concern amongst those who oppose free school choice within a wide array of options is that while public schools serve the needs of individual students they also have an obligation to serve the needs of society as a whole. Ensuring a common curriculum is not sufficient to achieve this purpose. Social cohesion, or what sociologists refer to as "social capital," is only created when all elements of society meet, share common experiences and learn to live with and respect each other, thus establishing norms of inclusiveness and reciprocity. This fundamental purpose of public schools within a democratic society is undermined when the system is fragmented by a range of schools that pool students and families in sub-communities of common interest. Concerns about potential elitism or inequity are a subset of this category. (For a more extensive discussion of social capital see attached Appendix 2.)

### **How might the District proceed with its consideration of school choice?**

The preceding classification of arguments for and against increased school choice is intended only to provide a starting point for more extensive discussion, and it is certainly a gross simplification of a complex issue, but it does illustrate that those who argue for and against school choice are often disagreeing on rather fundamental beliefs and not simply on surface features. Under our system of representative democracy the School Board is empowered to make such decisions on behalf of the community (within parameters that the provincial government determines), but given the deep issues involved and the high degree of interest it would be appropriate to establish a more broad-based process for discussion so that any decision, or lack of decision, is as well informed as possible.

I would suggest that the process might involve the following stages:

- Clarify the Question: Hopefully, this paper will have contributed to clarification of issues but it will also be important to hear what the Ministry has to say on this issue and to package the necessary information in an accessible way for parents and other interested members of the community, including students.
- Provide Information: Participants in this discussion will require concise, accurate information about the present situation, including such things as options now available and the success and shortcomings of the system as it now operates.
- Identify Options: There are some constraints imposed by existing legislation and the Board may also have non-negotiable philosophical commitments. It should be clear what is possible and what is not possible, so that discussion can focus productively.
- Declare a Process and a Time Line: A clear process and time line leading to specific decisions should be identified so that all interested person will be able to decide whether and how to participate. The Ministry may have expectations in this regard. It should also be noted that the next School Board election is scheduled for November, 2002. Since this discussion will require considerable time, it may lead into, and be a significant issue within, that process.

## Appendix 1

### **Market-Based Approaches to Publicly Funded Education**

The theory that market-based approaches are both appropriate and necessary for public education is proposed in a recent Fraser Institute publication titled *Can the Market Save our Schools?*, that contains essays written by a number of presenters at an April 2000 conference which it organized.

(See [http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/publications/books/market\\_schools/](http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/publications/books/market_schools/).)

In the first chapter, William Robson comments that the problems he sees in Ontario public schools stem from “incomplete curriculum, inadequate assessment, and a culture among many education professionals that ranks academic achievement behind the inculcation of politically correct attitudes and self-esteem.” He then describes the deeper roots of this issue as follows:

...these handicaps stems largely from dysfunctional governance. Publicly funded education in Ontario has become more centralized over the years, and bottom-up pressure to improve is weak because parents, teachers, principals, and school communities have little power to raise achievement at their schools.

This lack of local power creates a vicious circle, moreover, producing the deadlock referred to in my title. Because opportunities to make a difference at their schools are few and feeble, many parents, teachers, principals, and community members who would like to see better results turn off, and devote their time and energy to more promising causes. Their disengagement reinforces central control, and further exposes schools to the influences of weak curriculum, poor assessment, and the indifference toward academic objectives on the part of many in positions of influence in the education system.

If this diagnosis of the problem is correct, the cure lies in measures that will strengthen bottom-up pressure to improve. We need to give individual schools more autonomy. And we need to ensure that competitive pressures created by expanded parental choice will give more autonomous schools incentives to use that autonomy to improve student achievement.

In Chapter Two, Chester Finn reports on market-based approaches in the United States. He describes three approaches to educational reform in that country: more funding for public schools to allow them to do what they are trying to do now more effectively, strategic use of standards and incentives within the existing system in order to effect reform, and market-based approaches. He describes market-based approaches as follows:

This one avoids centralized, top-down change. It reflects grassroots, marketplace, competition-style change. For simplicity, we often call it the choice movement, though it takes many forms. The choice movement includes vouchers, charter schools, contract or out-sourced schools, all sorts of privately funded scholarship programs, open enrolment plans, public-school choice plans and other ways to foster diversity and competition in primary and secondary education. The theory behind it, which I subscribe to, holds that the regular system is most likely to change in response to pressure from competition. In many states, the standards-based reform paradigm is trying to co-exist with the marketplace reform paradigm. Sometimes they collide; usually they complement one another. Unfortunately, people tend to believe, as a matter of faith or doctrine, in one or the other: most people believe either in standards-based reform or in marketplace-based reform. I have come to believe in both.

In the introduction to Chapter three, Andrew Coulson describes the issue as follows:

From Canada and the United States to England and Australia, a debate is raging over school governance. The central issue is whether educational systems designed around free market principles and directed by the decisions of families would be superior to the government-run school systems most nations have today. Amidst the great variety of arguments that has been made on both sides of the issue, a general pattern has emerged. Supporters of market education tend to assert that their proposals would increase responsiveness to families and raise academic achievement, while critics argue that market systems could not produce the social benefits we have come to expect from public schooling.

With only a few exceptions, the participants in this debate are talking past one another. Many defenders of public schools acknowledge that there is at least a good chance of achievement improving under a vigorously competitive market, and most admit that competition and parental choice would force schools to cater more closely to the demands of the families they serve. Indeed, some public school supporters oppose market reforms precisely *because* they would cater to the diverse demands of parents. They fear that if parents were completely free to decide the course of their children's education, our societies would be factionalized and balkanized, destroying social cohesion and precipitating conflicts between different ethnic and religious groups.

Based on this assessment, it seems as though the best way out of the muddy rut into which the school choice debate has fallen is to take a hard look at the indirect social effects of market systems and compare them to those of state schooling. If markets prove to be as good or better at producing positive social outcomes, then the debate could take a great leap forward. But even suggesting such a possibility may be too much for some public schooling proponents to stomach. After all, they may be thinking, the very reason public schools were introduced in the first place was to bring literacy and learning to the masses, to promote understanding of and participation in democratic life, to ensure that all children had access to a good education regardless of family income, and to promote social cohesion. Given these *raison d'être*, how could public schools *not* be superior to market systems in creating social goods?

On the basis of an historical review, Coulson concludes as follows:

Contrary to popular conception, the preponderance of the evidence shows free education markets to have far more benign effects on their societies than state-run school systems. Though this finding may seem counter-intuitive at first, a single realization is all that is necessary to understand it: Coercion, not diversity, has historically been the cause of balkanization in education systems. Time and again, heterogeneous societies have been able to exist in comparative harmony thanks to the freedom of parents to obtain the sort of education they valued for their children without forcing it on their neighbours. State school systems, by contrast, have consistently been used by powerful groups (whether democratic majorities or ruling elites) to discriminate against weaker groups.

The rest of the book describes experience with market-based approaches in Alberta and in other countries, and the particular story of a parent and a child who used a voucher to opt out of the public schools in Indianapolis.

## Appendix 2

### Social Capital

Economists have long referred to land, labour and physical capital in their analyses. In the 1960s the concept of “human capital” was proposed to describe the additional asset represented for an organization or a society by educated, trained and healthy members who could utilize the traditional forms of capital effectively. More recently, the concept of “social capital” has been developed because it has been shown that even the best worker in the most well-equipped environment is unable to be productive without active networking. Social capital has many definitions but it generally refers to “the information, trust and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social networks.” (Woolcock, 1998) The concept of social capital has now come to be widely applied in sociological analyses as well as economic ones.

Social capital can be used to argue either for collective social action or for a more individualized social theory. Communitarians would say that the solution to modern social ills lies in re-establishing active civil life, and that this requires collective action to provide the norms and mechanisms that will enable all citizens to participate fully. Conservatives, on the other hand, are liable to say that the very existence of the state suppresses individual liberty and the potential for broad civic participation, and that decreasing the presence and influence of government is the way to enhance society’s stock of social capital and promote genuine civic engagement.

In a popular recent book, Robert Putnam describes the concept and the controversy as follows.

Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

... social capital has both an individual and a collective aspect—a private face and a public face. First, individuals form connections that benefit our own interests ... However, social capital also can have “externalities” that affect the wider community ... a well connected individual in a poorly connected society is not as productive as a well connected individual in a well connected society ...

Social connections are also important for the rules of conduct that they sustain ... Networks of community engagement foster sturdy norms of reciprocity ... [Sometimes] reciprocity is *specific*: I’ll do this for you if you do that for me. Even more valuable, however, is a norm of *generalized* reciprocity: I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road. The Golden Rule is one formulation of generalized reciprocity ... A society characterized by generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society ... Trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalized reciprocity ...

Sometimes “social capital,” like its conceptual cousin “community,” sounds warm and cuddly. Urban sociologist Xavier de Souza Briggs, however, properly warns us to beware of a treacherously sweet “kumbaya” interpretation of social capital. Networks and the associated norms of reciprocity are generally good for those inside the network, but the external effects of social capital are by no means always positive ...

Social capital, in short, can be directed toward malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital ...

Of all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary, perhaps the most important is the distinction between *bridging* (or inclusive) and *bonding* (or exclusive). Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs. Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations.

... bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves. In 1829 at the founding of a community lyceum [i.e., school] in the bustling whaling port of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Thomas Greene eloquently expressed this crucial insight:

We come from all the divisions, ranks and classes of society ... to teach and to be taught in our turn. While we mingle together in these pursuits, we shall learn to know each other more intimately; we shall remove many of the prejudices which ignorance or partial acquaintance with each other had fostered ... In the parties and sects into which we are divided, we sometimes learn to love our brother at the expense of him whom we do not in so many respects regard as brother ... We may return to our homes and firesides [from the lyceum] with kindlier feelings toward one another, because we have learned to know one another better ...

“Social Capital” is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles. Community has warred incessantly with individualism for preeminence in our political hagiology. Liberation from ossified community bonds is a recurrent and honored theme in our culture, from the Pilgrims' storied escape from religious convention in the seventeenth century to the lyric nineteenth-century paeans to individualism by Emerson (“Self Reliance”), Thoreau (“Civil Disobedience”), and Whitman (“Song of Myself”) to Sherwood Anderson's twentieth-century celebration of the struggle against conformism by ordinary citizens in *Winesburg, Ohio* to the latest Clint Eastwood film. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, patron saint of American communitarians, acknowledged the uniquely democratic claim of individualism, “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself.” (pp. 19-24)

After some 250 pages of detailed review and analysis of all available research, Putnam concludes:

Community connectedness is not just about warm and fuzzy tales of civic triumph ... social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy. (p. 290)

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Woolcock, M. (1998). Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 27, pp. 151-208.