

Decentralizing and Diversifying

Edmonton's schools have undergone a revolution, and it's not over yet!

By Andrew Nikiforuk

When Emery Dosedall became superintendent of Edmonton's public school system in 1995, teachers and principals alike thought the silver-haired manager had escaped from a zoo. Instead of sitting at his desk in central office attending endless meetings as superintendents are wont to do, the 58-year-old Dosedall started poking his tall frame into schools. Why, he even talked to teachers and principals!

Among other things, Dosedall asked parents and teachers what an ideal school system would look like. Everyone sidestepped the craze for innovation or creativity and put student achievement at the top of the list. As a result, Dosedall started to ask each and every principal a question they'd rarely heard before from a superintendent. "What are you doing to improve student achievement?" he demanded.

In just six years, Dosedall and staff took a ho-hum, highly-centralized big-city district, hemorrhaging students to private schools, and gave parents and teachers (dare we say it?) a system that is more customer-based and results-driven.

And just how did Edmonton do it? By bringing tough-minded, business-style management practices to central office and the neighbourhood school. Why Dosedall even turned school principals into CEOs and gave them a specific mandate: to focus on achievement.

In the process, the district increased enrolment, boosted teacher morale, and even won kudos (albeit qualified) from the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA). "A lot of Edmonton's reforms are very good," admits Larry Booi, ATA's outspoken president. "I applaud them for it."

In the process of beefing up its schools, Alberta's second-largest school district branched out into writing better school curricula — now a board revenue-generator. And, instead of fighting government funding for private and charter schools, Edmonton

decided to put its competitors out of business by operating more schools of choice than any other in North America.

You name it, Edmonton has it: a Hebrew school, an all-girls school, several aboriginal schools, a Spanish academy, schools for dropouts, and even a school devoted to both Canadian studies and budding ballerinas.

To great gasps of disbelief, the district also acquired or 'publicized' two private evangelical Christian schools. "And why not?" asked Dosedall. "We believe every child between the age of 5 and 20 is ours."

To give the local-decision model more umph, Dosedall took \$20 million earmarked for the district's central office and pumped it back into the schools. Edmonton principals now control 92¢ out of every school dollar.

This radical move changed the role of central office overnight and convinced principals that they were truly in charge. Instead of schools being servants of district psychologists, social workers and other staff, central office became a servant of the schools.

As a result, schools quickly stopped patronizing some central office departments. The people who supplied after-school workshops, for example, lost 85% of their clientele, while the technology services department tripled its business.

At the same time that Dosedall took the centre out of central office, he flatlined management by fully recognizing the importance of principals in school improvement. He started by getting rid of the district's nine associate superintendents. With the elimination of middle management, the system's principals became CEOs, or 'owners' of their own franchises.

Dosedall's mandate to principals was direct, if not scary: "The district is going to focus on results. I don't care how you get them but you can't break any laws."

To many principals, such as Bob Maskell, the 61-year-old founder of Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts, the change was liberating. "I was used to a system where it was impossible to get through the fortress of central office," notes the former businessman and now Alberta MLA.

Dosedall's keen focus on principals reflected sound research. Every study on school effectiveness over the last 30 years has identified the principal as a key actor — the instructional leader who sets the tone for the enterprise. "You can have an effective school without an effective principal, but it won't last long," notes Dosedall.

Dosedall, though, quickly realized that autonomy wasn't enough to make effective principals, so he focused on accountability. To this end, the school district introduced its own annual math and English tests to keep tabs on student progress.

To deal with their greater responsibility, principals now receive 200 hours of leadership training. In addition, every new principal works with a mentor and regularly meets with a support group.

Edmonton's educators also strongly believe that teachers teach best what they know. As a result, the board arranges for free university courses so that teachers can upgrade their education — something no other district in Canada does.

Last fall, Dosedall took his public school revolution over the Rockies, when he became British Columbia's deputy minister of education. Stay tuned for changes in that province.

Meanwhile, the new Edmonton superintendent, Angus McBeath, is no slouch either. "Leadership," says McBeath, "is getting people to do what they don't want to do and like it."

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