

Edmonton Fights Back

Edmonton public schools responded to competition by offering more school choice.

By Sean Fine

When the Aurora Charter School, featuring a back-to-basics approach, opened six years ago in an old nursing residence in Edmonton, the public school board did not sit back and watch as its students were siphoned off. No, it launched not one but two of its own back-to-basics schools nearby.

“We do not apologize for taking action to preserve and defend public education,” says Angus McBeath, the superintendent for Edmonton Public Schools.

The story behind the renowned diversity offered by the public schools of Edmonton is that of a board that felt it was fighting for its life. In 1995, the Alberta government changed the ground rules by allowing public charter schools and by handing larger amounts of public money to independent schools.

The public school board decided it had a choice: sit back and be snowed under, or move out front and compete. It chose to compete. Diversity and choice became the school board’s prime weapons.

Although the board had a history of tolerating choice, allowing children to attend schools out of their neighbourhoods for more than 30 years, its program was not noticeably diverse.

From a handful of programs offered a decade ago, the board’s offerings have more than doubled to 29 different programs. These include bilingual programs in Arabic, Chinese, and other languages; sports programs emphasizing soccer and hockey; programs with an aboriginal focus; academically advanced and international baccalaureate programs; and science and arts programs.

In all the praise Edmonton Public Schools receives for diversity, what sometimes gets overlooked is that the board once resisted giving parents what they wanted.

Ten years ago, a group of parents approached the board and asked for a girls’ school. “Edmonton Public wasn’t interested in us,” says John Masson, a local chartered accountant who was one of those parents. “Then Ralph Klein came out with charter school legislation.”

The parents moved to form a charter school. But when the school board changed its mind, the parents decided to sign on. “Once you’re in the fold, you have the opportunity to draw on all the resources of Edmonton Public”, says Masson.

The board discovered a hidden benefit of choice: reviving moribund downtown schools. Oliver School, built in 1910, was half-empty in 1995. All that changed when the board opened Nellie McClung Girls’ Junior High Program, housed within Oliver, for grades 7, 8, and 9.

The idea is that the school should help the girls develop their voices and be strong individuals in the very years of early adolescence when they tend to lose their self-confidence. The program is catching on. In 1995-96, it had 80 students; now it has a total of 500 at three different sites.

The Aurora Charter school is the antithesis of Nellie McClung. Where Nellie is, at least in theory, about using teachers as “facilitators” while the students lead the way, Aurora is old-style “teacher-centred”. Where Nellie’s girls sit in circles, the co-ed pupils at Aurora sit in rows.

The popularity of both Aurora and Nellie McClung attests to parental desire for choice. The public board’s nearby Cogito schools, its back-to-basics offerings, are also popular. In fact, children come from all over Edmonton and its outskirts for these programs.

“There is enough demand to fill this school, Cogito, and several more,” says Aurora’s principal, John Sproule.

Aurora was once part of Edmonton Public Schools. It broke away, however, because parents felt they did not have control of the school’s agenda. “Parents felt they didn’t have enough input into hiring teachers,” says Sproule. “They wanted to be in a charter school where there wasn’t the same direct Alberta Teachers Association influence.” The teachers do not have to be union members.

The Edmonton school board’s experience contains some interesting lessons for Ontario boards. There is no doubt that the school choice movement is gathering steam in Ontario, and it is just a matter of time before school boards face real competition.

The public boards may wish to consider whether to fight back in some way — and how to do it. Edmonton’s experience suggests one approach. By offering more choice within its own schools, the Edmonton board has stolen the thunder of the choice movement.

McBeath, the Edmonton superintendent, warns against “allowing things to get so rigid that you force the hand of government to go to things like private school charters, school vouchers, tax credits. By the time you reach that point, you’ve lost a lot of faith in the system, particularly among parents who nowadays seem to refuse to live with the option of one-size-fits-all.”

McBeath is a passionate proponent of the public system. Choice has “injected new confidence into the system about how capable we are of meeting the needs of an ever more diverse and complex society.”

(Adapted with permission from “Edmonton Fights Back” in Education Today, Fall 2002/Winter 2003, the magazine of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association. Mr. Fine writes for The Globe and Mail.)