

Where Parents Call the Shots

Edmonton has developed a wide variety of schools in response to parents' ability to choose.

By Randall Denley

The future of public education can be found in Edmonton, but it's not Alberta's widely-publicized charter schools that are showing the way. Instead, it's the public schools themselves.

In the traditional model of education, highly-paid educators hold the power and the parents hold the hotdog sales. But in Edmonton, the principals run the schools and manage seven-figure budgets, while the senior administration plays only a support role. And the parents call the shots, because they are free to choose any school in Edmonton. As a result, ideas for school programs often come from the parents themselves.

That's the case at Oliver School, a 1910 building on a quiet downtown Edmonton street. Five years ago, Oliver was a school with a limited future. Neighbourhood enrolment had shrunk to about 150, and the building was really a bit of a wreck.

Now Oliver is packed with life and enthusiasm and is just beginning a \$3.5-million renovation. Salvation has come in the form of the Nellie McClung program, a girls-only junior high school that principal Karen Linden says is one of only a few public single-gender programs in North America.

The school now has 270 Nellies, as they call themselves. They wear plaid skirts and blue sweatshirts crested with the school's initials. The program itself has a women's studies component and is intended to build self-reliance and leadership skills. About 130 students apply each year and 90 students, selected by lottery, are accepted.

Many schools in Edmonton market themselves with ads in the newspaper and signs outside their buildings, but Oliver has been able to fill its McClung spaces by word of mouth and media coverage. Demand has been sufficient to open a second campus.

The Nellie McClung program came about, like many of the changes in Edmonton, because of parental demand. John Masson was one of the parents who founded the program, and he still serves on the 12-member parent board of directors. The founders felt that girls in grades 7 to 9 would be better able to find their own voices, especially in male-dominated subjects such as science and math. The first wave of Nellies is now in high school and teachers "are impressed with the girls' confidence and participation," Masson says.

Masson credits Alberta legislation allowing charter schools with motivating Edmonton Public Schools to accept the McClung program. "The schools have to compete; so they try to offer something. Everybody's trying to get a unique niche. It's been good for the kids."

So many niches have been established in Edmonton that parents really have to do their homework. Approximately 17% of Edmonton's public school students are now in alternative programs, although there are no fixed school boundaries — so even the neighbourhood schools must compete against each other!

Among the alternative programs is that offered by the Cogito school, with its structured learning, phonics-based language training, lots of math drill and less group work. The program isn't elitist, principal Charlotte Corothers says, but is aimed at "the severely normal child." The parents who proposed the Cogito program wanted a charter school but were persuaded to join the public system.

Then there's the Logos program, which brings a Christian aspect to school. It is so popular that it is now offered at eight sites. The schools don't promulgate the dogma of one faith, but they do try to tie lessons to

the Bible, and they offer group prayer and hymns. "I have seen a lot of parents send their children to private Christian schools, and I felt we in the public system could do just as well," says Judy Zilinsky, principal of Kensington school.

The Victoria School of Performing and Visual Arts was in danger of collapse when Bob Maskell took over 15 years ago. At that time, the school housed ESL students and students who had trouble in the regular system. Today, the vast building is home to 2,000 students in an arts program that runs from kindergarten to grade 12. It is one of the few sites in North America to offer the demanding International Baccalaureate (IB) program from kindergarten through grade 12. Mr. Maskell manages an \$8-million budget.

A few of the other choices available to Edmonton parents include: ballet partnership (1 school), research, science and technology focus (1 school), hockey training (4 schools), IB (6 schools), bilingual programs, including Arabic, Mandarin and Ukrainian (23 schools), and on-line instruction.

Choice programs actually began in Edmonton high schools in 1972, but in 1980 budget control was moved to the schools. That's when it really took off. Today, middle management has been eliminated, with principals reporting directly to the superintendent. The role of senior administration is to offer oversight and consulting. The money for staff development is at the schools, and central staff are paid by the schools for the work they do at the schools' request.

A commitment to parental choice and alternative education has turned the education power structure upside-down.

(Adapted with permission from The Ottawa Citizen, April 15, 1999)