

Forget pens, pencils and erasers. In Edmonton, parents go shopping for schools

Back-to-School Shopping

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by Myrna Kostash

Back in the day, when I went to Ross Sheppard composite high school, we studied the same curriculum, read the same books (more or less) and wrote the same matriculation exams as every other kid in the Edmonton school system. It's true we were "streamed," and, headed for university, I took extra English classes and Latin instead of biology. I had some vague idea that there were pupils in other schools who did auto mechanics or were fanatical basketball players; me, I yearned to go to Victoria high school (or Vic, as we called it) because it had a theatre as well as the gym, and really cool people (boys) starred in musicals. But I wasn't in Vic's catchment area, so that was that.

That's not the case today. In fact, the Edmonton Public School District has for a long time now dispensed with the compulsory catchment area – although children in each area still have first dibs on available classroom spaces in the local school – and moved to a system-wide offering of schools with a mind-boggling array of "alternative programs" in addition to the core subjects. The move was fully supported by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). And so my friends, who are trying to figure out where to send their kids to school, pore over the offerings. It's precisely the alternative programs that entice them, for these have been developed in response to a need identified by groups of parents and where there is sufficient enrolment to justify the program.

Aboriginal education? The Awasis program at Prince Charles Elementary provides Cree language instruction and an appreciation of "native cultures and traditions." Athletics? Vimy Ridge Academy (Grades 7-12) presents a hockey-training program (costs of the non-academic hockey part of the program are borne by parents). Language and culture? Available in the 2010-11 school year were bilingual programs in Arabic (in four schools), Mandarin (12), French (16), German (five), Hebrew (one), Spanish (three), and Ukrainian (four).

If choice is what parents want, well, they certainly have it now. That has forced the schools (including Ross Sheppard) to compete with each other for parents' attention. Ever since Edmonton Public moved to school-based budgeting, with each school responsible for its own budget and with the base per-student instruction allocation moving around with the student, you can see the pressure on school principals to make sure there are enough "bums in seats" to run

the show. A friend, a retired high school teacher, remembers her own experience of this new environment with her daughters entering junior high: “Shopping for schools,” she called it.

But perhaps there is something more to this pedagogical enthusiasm for “choice.” It may be that the school district and the ATA sensed an opportunity, within the public system, to fend off threats of privatization of the system – the idea of an education voucher, for example, which would be given to each household to “spend” as it saw fit, or the suggestion that fees paid to private schools be tax deductible. In Alberta, there was the additional wrinkle of the charter school concept, introduced in 1994 and driven by a belief in the importance of parental control, free market competition among schools and the right to “customer satisfaction.” They have not proliferated: according to a 2010 report for the Canada West Foundation, *Innovation in Action: An Examination of Charter Schools in Alberta* by Shawna Ritchie, charter school students represent just 1.2 per cent of the total student population in Alberta, compared with 69 per cent of students in public boards (the other approximately 29 per cent are in private schools).

A friend has described to me the atmosphere of school open houses, the almost carnivalesque evening when schools throw open their doors to parents and kids to advertise their wares. Hundreds of people cram the gym for displays of cheerleading, Ukrainian dancing and drama productions before moving on through the halls for chemistry demonstrations in labs, scholarship information in the French immersion classroom, monster cookies in the home economics kitchen. Pick me! Pick me! Your neighbourhood public school has become a marketplace of ideas jostling for your attention. Choose well.