



Choice and Accountability in Canadian Education

Reference Guide

Moving across the country to a new city means many changes for a family like mine, not the least of which is settling our three children into new schools. We are coming from a city where Niki, our youngest, was enrolled in a Grade 2 program for gifted children in a private school. Max was able to attend Grade 5 in a French Immersion program in a school across town to which we car-pooled with two other neighbours. And Fritz, our eldest, was doing a distance education program at home because no school could accommodate his speed skating schedule as he prepared for the junior World Cup competitions. Our move means finding a new place to live, in a new city, in a new province, and with many questions to answer: Will home schooling still be needed for Fritz and does this province allow us to do home schooling? What about French Immersion? Is it available and do we have to live near the school or can we send Max to any school that offers a French Immersion program? We are wondering whether the public system will have a gifted kids program for Niki. Will we need to find a place to live near that school or can we send her to any school we chose? Or will we need to find a private school that we can afford? We have talked to a friend living in this city who has many opinions on where the best schools are, but how will we really know whether the schools are any good and whether they will suit our children and our family?

CHOOSING SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS: WHERE TO BEGIN?

Primary and secondary education in Canada is the mandate of the provinces, except for First Nations students. The independence of the provinces has resulted in variation across the provincial systems. One important difference is the extent to which students and parents are free to choose the school district, the school, and the program the student will attend, and another is the extent and type of accountability mechanisms used to judge those districts, schools, and programs. Knowing about the availability of these options in Canadian cities requires a province-by-province, city-by-city inventory of policies and practices.

Issues related to school choice and accountability are increasingly recognized as being central to discussions on how to improve primary and secondary education in Canada. As a means of contributing to this discussion, the Choice and Accountability in Canadian Education (CACE) Project was undertaken (a) to document the range of school choice, program choice, and accountability policies and practices in all provinces and in 11 urban centres, and (b) to provide a review of the policies, practices, and findings that will inform future discussions and explorations of school choice, program choice, and accountability in Canadian education. The products of this work are presented in four related documents: this *Reference Guide to CACE*; the *Report on Choice and Accountability in Canadian Education*; the *CACE Literature Review*; and the *CACE Comprehensive Appendices*¹. This Reference Guide provides a snapshot of the current state of policies and

practices related to school choice, program choice, and accountability, as well as summaries of related findings and issues.

DOING SOME HOMEWORK

The CACE Research Team started by reviewing research reports and journal articles from several countries in search of key ideas that could guide the survey of school choice in Canada. In reviewing the literature, we found a growing demand for school choice in all of the countries included in the review. However, choice in schooling is not available to all parents to the same degree. Barriers to real choice are faced by certain groups (e.g., difficulties related to getting information on the programs, transportation, fees and “hidden costs,” admission policies, and selection criteria).

Throughout the literature, the term “school choice” is most frequently applied to choice outside the public system of education. Choice usually refers to the availability of private or independent schools, charter schools, school voucher systems, or home schooling. Although attention is paid to the number of parents and students exercising choice outside the public school system, and to the nature of this choice, notably less attention is given to reporting on the nature of choice within public systems.

Not surprisingly, there are mixed results concerning the link between the availability of choices in education and student achievement. In many studies no notable gains were found for students in schools of choice, and in those studies where gains were noted it is impossible to establish that the gains were due to the exercise of choice or to selection of specific programs. Variables such as student selection, parent involvement, and home environment may also play a notable part in determining students’ academic performance. These cautions are especially appropriate in evaluating performance in many private schools, where rigorous selection criteria could increase the likelihood of stronger academic attainment than in schools without such selection criteria.

Finally, a whole range of questions relating to appropriate accountability structures also emerged in the literature dealing with choice. At the most general level, questions arose as to how the public can be educated and informed about school choice programs in general, so that citizens can make informed decisions and have informed opinions. More specifically, the question that needs to be asked is what accountability measures are in place for each of the programs.

¹ All four documents can be found at www.cup.ualberta.ca/resources_documents.html

COMPARISON SHOPPING

To document the range of options across Canada, we reviewed the policies, procedures, regulations, and practices impacting choice and accountability within each of the ten provinces and the school jurisdictions in 11 urban areas. Details were summarized by research interns who analyzed publicly available provincial and jurisdiction documents. Then interviews were conducted with representatives from ministries of education and school jurisdictions. Interviews were designed to gather further information not provided in documents. All provincial and jurisdiction representatives were provided the opportunity to confirm that the reports prepared by the interns were an accurate reflection of their organization.

Information was gathered about whether, and the extent to which, (a) students were free to enrol in the school of their choice, (b) program choices were available within each province and school jurisdiction, and (c) information about accountability measures were made available to aid parent and student choice. The questions were constructed to determine the availability and variety of school and program choices, the policies and regulations related to choice, funding support for choice, the provision of information advising parents and students which choices were available, enrolments, and accountability structures. (A complete listing of the questions is found in the *CACE Comprehensive Appendices*.)



WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?

At the end of this reference guide, a summary of the details derived from documents and interviews is displayed in two charts that show comparisons across provinces and school jurisdictions. Some of the more interesting discoveries are reported below:

- Overall, we found that there is much more school and program choice available in the school jurisdictions in the 11 urban centres than was expected. In addition, “school choice” is a much broader concept than many assume, including not only choices outside the public school jurisdictions, but the growing development of alternatives and choices within the public systems. Overall, the **range of choices both within and beyond the public systems appears to be expanding**. All provinces allow home schooling programs and the operation of private schools. The manner through which these are regulated, monitored, and supported differs greatly among the provinces.
- **All provinces report that their legislation allows for but does not compel local school authorities to provide choice to parents and students.** Four of the provinces support open boundaries between public jurisdictions, with funding following the student to the jurisdiction chosen by the parents or students. None of the provinces requires a practice of open boundaries within jurisdictions, nor do they prohibit such practices. However, there appears to be only one jurisdiction (Edmonton Public Schools) that has open boundaries within the district with the majority of the funding following the student to the school of choice. Perhaps the most revealing issue that emerged is that expansion of school and program choice cannot be achieved merely by changing provincial legislation.
- Though in common use, the **terms “school choice” and “program choice” are not commonly understood**, making descriptions and comparisons difficult. Definitions of accountability are equally problematic, thus it has been difficult to compare the role accountability plays in the arena

of school choice across Canada. “Choice” is often used to refer either school choice, program choice, and/or course choice. “School choice” may be used to mean access to different types of school jurisdictions—public, public separate, francophone, private/independent, charter, or First Nations schools. But it may also refer to access to any school within a public or separate jurisdiction. The term “program choice” seems (a) to include both a program that is intended to be long-term, sustainable, involving several grades, an entire track in a school, or an entire school, or (b) to mean a series of individual courses that are not necessarily part of a comprehensive program.

- **Jurisdictions differ in what they include in their educational accountability system, and what they make readily accessible to the public.** When looking at learner outcomes, comparability is hampered by the fact that curricula vary across provinces and thus provinces are not measuring the same outcomes at the same grade levels. Although provincial achievement tests of some type are broadly administered, the degree to which they are used to provide feedback to districts, schools, parents, and the public appears to vary from province to province and district to district. As well, one province (PEI) does not currently have standardized provincial examinations. The extent to which survey data, anecdotal information, and enrolments are used as accountability measures also varies.
- Not all provinces or districts report on the number of students selecting various school options such as private, separate, or home schooling nor is it typical for provinces to report number of students in programs of choice. Because of a **lack of common enrolment or achievement data**, comparisons across jurisdictions and provinces are difficult. For instance, some information that would be highly valuable in understanding choice is the number of students not attending their neighbourhood school. This information is collected only selectively so it is impossible to compare the extent to which there is movement across districts and among schools.
- None of the provinces or jurisdictions collects information on the number of parents or students who, despite open boundaries, attend their local school by deliberate choice.
- **When parents/students choose schools outside of the public schools, the funding generally does not follow the student.** Where it does, nowhere is the amount the same as is provided for the public districts (except in the case of the Charter Schools in Alberta). The largest transfer of funding to private schools (as a proportion of the per pupil grants) is 60%, found in Alberta. However, despite the more generous funding, Alberta does not have the largest proportion of students attending private schools. Quebec (9.1%), Manitoba (8.8%), and British Columbia (6.3%) all exceed Alberta (4.4%) in the proportion of students registered in private schools.
- The presence of options from which to choose depends on a combination of factors, including provincial policy, jurisdiction policy and practice, program offerings, and community expectations. **Provincial legislation alone fails to serve as an adequate indicator of the availability of choice.** Provincial legislation only indicates the possibility of or the right to choice, not the actual existence of choice. Even if choice is legislated, it may not be promoted by, or easily accessed, within a school jurisdiction. Furthermore, a lack of a position on the issue of school choice, as is the case with Newfoundland and Labrador’s neutrality on the issue, does not necessarily hinder the actual provision of choice at the jurisdiction level.

- A policy of **open boundaries** is first and foremost about the choice of where to attend school, but it is not necessary to the provision of program choice. That is, open boundaries operate as an enabling, but not necessary, condition in the provision of educational choice.

- There are a number of factors that enable or act as barriers to choice. **Enabling factors** include (a) a **commitment**, the clear and unequivocal commitment by the leadership in the ministry or the jurisdiction to providing and expanding choice (see box to the right) and (b) **open boundaries**, a key signal that choice is important and available. Open boundaries are a fundamental feature of inter-district and intradistrict choice. Open boundaries may be absent in districts that promote program choice.

AN EXAMPLE OF CHOICE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Edmonton Public Schools is committed to the idea of school choice and has oriented its policies, practices, programs, and actions to providing choices. It has had open boundaries since 1974. More and more, Edmonton Public Schools is fielding requests to consult about choice in public systems. It has become well known for its success in providing choice, which would not have been possible if the district had not been committed to the idea and acted upon that commitment.

- Barriers or constraints are of two kinds: those felt by providers and those felt by the users of the education system. **Barriers** identified by providers include **development costs**, availability of **space** and **specialized staff**, **transportation costs**, and insufficient **demand** to sustain a viable program. **Constraints** faced by parents and students include simple **unavailability of options**, **costs** (including fees and transportation), **entrance requirements**, and **access to information** about the availability of choices.

OPENING A CAN OF WORMS

School and program choice represent a vast and complex area of policy and practice. This study was designed to review and describe the choices currently available in Canada and to explore the links to accountability. As we proceeded, however, we realized that there is still much to learn about relevance and meaning of choice and accountability in Canadian education and society.

- Further study is required regarding the relation between **equity** and the provision of choice in public schooling. In provinces where the provision of choice is not supported, policy makers tend to believe that choice undermines their commitment to democratic principles such as equity in public education. They believe public education is intended to serve all students and families in an equal manner, in keeping with the concept of “public.” They do not appear to contemplate the possibility that having a common core of intended aims, applicable to all students but with variations in programming to address the various needs or interests of students, is more equitable in meeting learner needs. Further study is required regarding school jurisdictions where advocates argue that access to a wide variety of choices is provided without compromising equity. We need to examine what equity means in terms of public schooling, what barriers exist in terms of achieving equity, and what role the provision of school and program choice can, or cannot, play in achieving equity in public education.
- Another significant question that requires further research is the significance of providing **religious programs** as a choice within public education. This option is not common in Canada at this point, but in some public school jurisdictions the religious programs that are provided are experiencing continued interest and increases in their enrolment.

In addition, where provinces fully fund Catholic education within public education, it would be useful to examine why this funding may not extend to other religious groups. Further research would be useful in identifying what opportunities and challenges are created for a school jurisdiction in offering a religious program and to what extent there is a demand for religious programs across the country.

- One aspect of choice that we need to understand more clearly is the **impact** of choice on students, parents, and school jurisdictions. For example, further investigation is needed regarding the relations among choice, student achievement, attitudes, and behaviour. To what extent does making a choice to enrol in a program, or attend a particular school, lead to increased achievement for students, more positive attitudes toward schooling, and more positive behaviour in school? How does one affect the other?
- **How and why parents and students make certain choices** needs to be better understood. What are the factors considered by parents when deciding on schools and school programs? Does the opportunity for parents to make these choices lead to increased parental involvement and therefore an increased positive impact on student learning? What are the most important considerations for parents in making school or program choices? In provinces and jurisdictions, are there certain groups of parents who take advantage of choice and certain groups of parents who do not? Is selecting schools and programs more common at some levels of schooling than others? And perhaps the most critical question to be addressed: What is, or might be, the impact of telling parents that they have few, or no choices available to them when deciding the schooling and education of their children, either within or beyond the public schools?
- Participants in our study identified a number of barriers that provinces and jurisdictions face in providing choice. An important area of future study would be to examine how provinces and school districts **overcome these challenges**. It would be important to examine the impact of offering choice on the staffing and resources required for particular programs, and to what extent it is possible to put in place the resources required. In addition, in some school jurisdictions, the promotion of choice creates a fear of loss of job security, decreased wages, and lower standards of employment for staff. Understanding how school jurisdictions successfully meet these challenges would inform our overall understanding of how school jurisdictions can effectively provide choice.

- School and program choices have only recently been implemented in some provincial and urban school jurisdictions, whereas in others they have been in place for many years. It would be instructive to undertake an analysis of anticipated trends in regard to demand and interest. Are there provinces or jurisdictions that



have more demand than others for choice and, if so, what are the factors that contribute to this demand? What kinds of choices are of most interest to parents and students? Are there choices that are no longer in demand, and what are the factors that have contributed to this change? Are there choices within special needs programs, and within early childhood programs? To what extent are second language programs still in demand? The collection of this kind of information would be particularly useful to school jurisdictions as they strategically plan their programs.

- It should be noted that there is often a **gulf between policy and practice** respecting both choice and accountability. There appear to be number of instances where the policy supports school and programs choices but the practice is more restrictive than the policy would suggest. Investigating this gap in light of what is known about change in educational systems, for example, could assist policy makers in making decisions.

OPTIONS IN THE LONG RUN

An interesting “unturned stone” in our study is related to our speculations about the impact that widely available school and program choice might have on the cohesiveness of our society. Canada is country of much diversity—diversity in culture and language, in geography, and in politics. Schools have historically provided for a common set of concepts and expectations for young people as they were growing up. As we pursued this study, our questions and discussions centred increasingly around the following questions: As the diversity in education programming starts to mirror, and perhaps increase, the diversity in the country, how will our sense of community and our ability to understand each other and work together be affected? If all the issues around school choice—issues of costs, transportation space—vanished, what are the boundaries that we would find ourselves needing to put around the types of choices available in schools and programs? How would accountability measures serve to ensure that the boundaries are appropriate and observed?



Prepared by the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP) as part of the Choice and Accountability in Canadian Education project

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Funding for the Choice and Accountability in Canadian Education Project was provided by the Max Bell Foundation. The authors are grateful to Allan Northcott of the Max Bell Foundation for his very useful suggestions and support, to Lynn Bosetti and Dan Brown for their helpful comments on previous drafts, and to Miranda Diakiw, Kelly Shaw, and Leslie Mackey for their expert assistance in various phases of the project. This report and other, related documents are available at ww.cup.ualberta.ca/resources_documents.html.

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December, 2003

Settling in to our new city has taken longer than we anticipated. We bought a home in a historical district close to my work but now realize that transportation for schooling will be a huge issue. Finding information about our options for schools and programs was more difficult than we thought it would be. This city has five school boards and over 20 private schools. Nowhere could we find a single source of information. The provincial government provided us with the names of people to contact so we used that list to start our search. From many calls to the people in the districts and the private schools, we discovered that there were several school and program options that might suit our needs. By calling schools we were able to find a French Immersion program offered by a public school district for Max and a program in another school for Niki that we think will challenge her. For Fritz we found a public school that offered programs built around the unusual schedules for students in sports and the arts. That district is adjacent to the city where we live but the province sends the education funds to whichever district we choose, so the school was happy to have Fritz enrol. Transportation will still be a challenge but we are hoping to find a way to car pool. Upon reflection, we are very happy to have moved to an area that allows us to choose schools for our kids, but I can't believe there isn't an easier way to learn about schools and programs.

CHOICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACROSS PROVINCES

	Alberta	British Columbia	Manitoba	New Brunswick	Newfoundland and Labrador	Nova Scotia	Ontario	Prince Edward Island	Quebec	Saskatchewan
1. Does Provincial legislation allow choice?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Does Provincial legislation require open boundaries?										
Interdistrict?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No, but every person has the right to choose schooling in either the Anglophone or Francophone sectors.	No	No	No	No	No	Yes (but both sending and receiving school districts/ schools must agree to student's school of choice)
Intradistrict?	No		Left to the discretion of the district	Left to the discretion of the district	Left to the discretion of the district	Left to the discretion of the district	Left to the discretion of the jurisdiction	Left to the discretion of the jurisdiction	Left to the discretion of the jurisdiction	Left to the discretion of the district
3. Does provincial funding "follow" the student to the jurisdiction of choice?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Only when transferring between the Anglophone and Francophone sectors	Not in the transfer year - school districts receive funding using a formula which considers enrollment and grade configuration within each school. Funding is always based on the previous year's enrollment, which is to the districts' advantage as enrollment decline has been continuous since 1984.	Left to the discretion of school districts/ boards	Yes	No	Yes, though a funding is not directly tied to students.	District school to on reserve school transfer; funding is transferred. Other transfers only occur at the discretion of the student's "home" jurisdiction.
4. Choices Prohibited, Constrained or Guaranteed by Legislation	Religious Charter Schools are prohibited. Public, Separate, Charter are guaranteed as are francophone schools for those with Charter rights.	All public schools must be non-denominational, charter schools are prohibited. Francophone schools may only be accessed by those exercising their charter rights	Ministry of Education, while allowing choice, does not obligate school divisions to supply transportation when students attend schools of choice	Publicly funded schooling in either English or French is guaranteed. All public schools must be non-denominational. Anglophone districts may not offer French first language instruction. Francophone Charter rights are guaranteed	Publicly funded schooling is guaranteed. No public school may be of a specific religious denomination, though observances may be kept upon parental request. Anglophone districts may not offer French First Language instruction. Francophone Charter rights are guaranteed.	Publicly funded schooling is guaranteed. All public schools must be non-denominational. French first language instruction is only available to persons with language rights; un-requested private schools are prohibited	Access to Francophone or Anglophone public jurisdictions is guaranteed; access to Separate School Districts is available to Catholic persons or children of Catholic persons.	Access to public schooling is guaranteed. All public schools must be non-denominational. French first language schools are only established "where numbers warrant", therefore persons may be served either outside of their area of residence or within English language schools. The Governor in Council may allow non-eligible persons to attend French first language schools.	Francophone public education is guaranteed. Anglophone education is restricted to those who meet the eligibility criteria (Legislation specifies who can attend Anglophone schools and who cannot). Private schools must have a permit to operate.	
5. Percentage of students in Private/ Independent schools (1998-99)	4.4%	8.8%	6.3%	0.6%	4.0% (1.1% as of 2002-2003)	1.5%	4.3% (5.1%-2000-2001)	1.0%	9.1%	1.2%
6. Percentage of Provincial funding for students by Category	Charter - 100%; Private registered only - 0%; Private accredited - 60%	Home schools: \$250,000 allocated to each home schooled student. Independent schools: 0-50% of public funding; (Group 1 schools - 50%; Group 2 schools - 35%; Group 3 and 4 schools - 0%)	6.3%	Private - 0%; Home Schooling - 0% (unless designated by board)	Private: 0; Home schooling: 0 (unless designated by board)	Private: 0; Home Schooling: 0 (unless a student uses services offered by the district, then full funding for district)	Private: 0; Home Schooling: 0 (unless enrolled part-time with a public school district)	Private: 0; Home schooling: 0 (but textbooks available through Dept. of Ed.)	Accredited Private Schools: amount determined annually by the Ministry of Education. Home schooling: left to the discretion of the jurisdiction	Private Elementary: 0% Limited no. of Private Secondary: 50%
7. Provincial Age Requirements	Required: 6-16; Entitled 6-18	Required: 6-16; Entitled: 5-19	Required: 7-16; Entitled: 6-21 or graduation	Required 5 to 18; Entitled 5 to 21	Required: 6-16; Entitled: 5-21	Required: 6-16; Entitled: 6-15	Required 6-16; Entitled: 4 (junior kindergarten) or 5 (kindergarten) - 21	Required: 7 on or before January 31 of a school year - 16; Entitled: 6-20	Required: 6 to 16; Entitled 6 to 18 (5-21 for disabled persons); full day kindergarten available but not compulsory; pre-kindergarten for low income available.	Required: 6-16; Entitled: 6-22
8. Is there a mandated provincial curriculum?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. Provincial Accountability Measure Requirements										
International testing:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
National testing:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provincial testing:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Provincial Surveys:		Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Comprehensive district reviews:		Yes		Yes	Yes					
Annual Planning Reports:	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes			Yes		
High School Completion Rates:	Yes			Yes	Yes					
Student Progress Reports:	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Other:		Accountability Contracts	FRAME (Financial Reporting and Accountability in Manitoba Education reporting)	Essential Graduation Learnings;	Essential Graduation Learnings; School Development/ School Improvement Process	Essential Graduation Learnings;	District Audits	Essential Graduation Learnings		Indicators Program

