

Meeting the Challenge:
The Klein Revolution, Charter Schools, and Alternative Programs in Edmonton Public
Schools
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March 23, 2015

Part I: Introduction to Alternative Programs

The 1990's was a time of great change for Edmonton Public Schools (EPS). Under superintendent Emery Dosdall, increasing the diversity of educational offerings became a goal that was pursued with a near-frantic urgency, while the administrative structure of the district was given a major overhaul. The means of acquiring this vaunted diversity was found in a policy that emphasized the creation of new 'alternative programs.' 'Alternative programs' are publicly funded educational programs offered by EPS, and administered by the elected trustees of the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB). They place an emphasis on language, religion, culture, or pedagogy that renders them distinct from mainstream programs. Alternative Programs are still required to follow the Alberta curriculum, however, their mode of instruction is different from mainstream programs. Typically, they are offered in the same facility as other mainstream programs, which allowed alternative program students the opportunity to interact with a wide range of peers.

While alternative programs were first established in the 1970's under Strembitsky, they did not assume their prominent, modern role in EPS until the 1990's. To understand why the 1990's bore witness to a flourishing of alternative programs, it is necessary to examine the provincial political climate of that era. In 1994, Alberta Premier Ralph Klein introduced sweeping budgetary cuts to provincial health and education programs. These cuts did not occur in isolation, but were accompanied by efforts designed to reform health and education services. In education, key reform initiatives included the development of a charter school 'pilot project' and the seizure of property tax collection rights from local school districts. These two changes, both

introduced as part of the sweeping 'Bill 19' amendments to Alberta's Schools Act, led directly to a renewed interest in alternative programs in EPS.

However, the blossoming of alternative programs witnessed in EPS in the mid 1990's was far from guaranteed. Indeed, the successful expansion of alternative programs can be attributed to the efforts of dedicated and farsighted individuals within EPS, foremost amongst them EPS Superintendent Emery Dosedall. Despite facing major financial hurdles at the time of Dosedall's superintendency, EPS was able to both overhaul its central administration, greatly increasing efficiency, and dramatically expand its alternative program offerings. In order to explore the expansion of alternative programs, it is important to look at the relationship established between EPS and the community groups that sought to obtain charter status. What follows is an account of the origins of the alternative program boom of the 1990's in EPS, an event that resulted in the diverse array of programs that remains a defining feature of EPS to this day.

Part II: Alternative Programs prior to 1994

Though EPS rapidly expanded the diversity of the alternative programs it offered after the passage of Bill 19 in 1994, the story of alternative programs in Edmonton begins in the 1970's. Under the influential leadership of long-serving Superintendent Michael A. Strembitsky, two initiatives that continue to influence the school system today were first adopted. The first was the introduction of 'open boundaries.' Open boundaries allowed parents greater choice in deciding which school to enroll their children, as children were no longer required to attend their local schools. The second policy was the establishment of alternative programs in EPS.

Strembitsky developed the theoretical underpinnings for alternative programming in the district. His intentions for alternative programs in EPS were made clear in his 1974 document "Alternatives in Education", in which he explained "Alternative Education" was "a means of delivering educational services to a plurality of publics which provides accessible choice among a diversity of programs." Strembitsky also outlined several objectives for alternative programs in EPS, which included expanding the multiplicity of programs available to families. He intended to have smaller classrooms with higher student to teacher ratios in alternative program classrooms. Addressing Edmonton's growing cultural diversity and incorporating these values into EPS, according to Strembitsky, was the most effective way to truly be a public school system.

Beginning in the 1970s, EPS gradually expanded its alternative program offerings. In 1974, Strembitsky oversaw the introduction of EPS's first three alternative programs: a French language program, a Ukrainian language program, and an academically focused program implemented in the Grandview Heights and Crestwood schools. The following year, the Talmud Torah School, formerly a Hebrew private school, was incorporated into EPS, as was the Caraway program. This rapid expansion of alternative programs continued throughout the decade. In 1977 EPS brought the Arts program and the Awasis program into the alternative program fold. More additions to the alternative program roster were to follow: the German bilingual and Alpha programs in 1978, the Waldorf program in 1979, the International Baccalaureate program in 1981, and Arabic and Mandarin programs in 1983. Finally, the Victoria School of Visual and Performing Arts was added to the lineup in 1986. Clearly, the alternative programs

initiative saw a rapid expansion in the 1970s with the inclusion of eleven separate programs. New programs continued to be added into the 1980s, albeit at a slower rate, as only four new programs saw the light of day. However, between 1987 and 1994, not a single new alternative program came to fruition. These years actually saw a contraction of alternative program offerings, as the Waldorf program was discontinued in 1991. This cooling of interest, however, would soon come to an end. Indeed, in the mid-1990's alternative program offerings expanded at an unprecedented rate.

Part III: The Charter School Movement

The story of the rapid growth of alternative programs within EPS during the 1990's is one that is closely tied to the charter school movement. The charter schools issue is one that is both controversial and highly politicized. The best way to approach this thorny issue may be to step back and start at the beginning. What is a charter school? A charter school is a school that receives public funding, yet has no ties to a publicly elected school board. Instead, a charter school is administered by a non-profit organization, typically formed with the express intent of establishing and governing a particular charter school. A charter school begins with the creation of a charter school proposal, which is submitted to the government agency responsible for education. Successful proposals are awarded 'charters' by the government, which typically last from three to five years. Once this period of time elapses, renewal of a school's charter is dependent upon whether or not the charter school was able to meet government mandated goals set at the beginning of the charter term. Additionally, schools are monitored throughout their charter term to ensure they are meeting the general standards expected of any school.

The purpose of charter schools, however, is not simply to mirror the programming of public schools. Successful charter school proposals must demonstrate the educational program they intend to offer differs from those provided by public schools, and that sufficient demand for such a program exists within the community. Furthermore, it is important to note that charter schools are not simply publicly funded private schools; unlike private schools, charter schools cannot charge tuition, cannot screen admissions with entrance requirements, and must be run as non-profit organizations.

Many might wonder why a government would want to use public funds to support privately governed schools in the first place. Isn't the public interest better served if schools are accountable to publicly elected officials? The answer is that, from a theoretical and ideological perspective, charter schools are rarely considered an end goal in and of themselves. Instead, they are seen as a means of achieving broader goals of educational reform. The most salient of these goals include increasing autonomy for individual schools, achieving greater accountability within public education, and the bringing of market forces, such as consumer choice and competition, to bear on the public education system. Such goals were in no way particular to Alberta, however, instead reflecting a North America-wide strain of educational reform thought.

Proponents of charter schools as a general concept (as opposed to proponents of a particular charter school, whose only desire might be to see a particular educational approach become available within a community) typically contend that public education's bureaucracy, consisting of unions, school boards, administrators, and

legislators, is unresponsive and contributes greatly to perceived flaws in public education. In the view of these proponents, the unwieldy public education bureaucracy is not only inefficient, but stifles creativity and is fundamentally incapable of self-reform. Charter schools, in contrast, would be governed by small, local, independent boards consisting mostly of parents, and would not be beholden to unions or large scale bureaucracies. As such, charter schools would be capable of flexibility and innovation that the public system could never hope to match.

But the true value of charter schools, according to its advocates, rested in their ability to serve as a catalyst for reform in the public education system. California think tank the Little Hoover Commission offered a typical pro-charter school perspective, envisioning charter schools “acting as a wedge for both internal and external forces.” That is, externally, upon seeing the new types of programming offered by charter schools, student and parental demand for the kinds of choices they offered would increase, forcing public schools to develop similar programming to remain competitive. Internally, individual public schools would look enviously at the autonomy enjoyed by charter schools, and would begin agitating for similar flexibility and freedoms. The anticipated result would be a public education system that allowed individual schools greater freedom and decision-making powers, and was more responsive to public demands for greater diversity in program offerings. The predicted effect of increased diversity of programming and school autonomy was an overall improvement in student achievement.

There can be little doubt that elements within the Government of Alberta agreed with this line of thinking. Immediately prior to the passage charter school legislation in

Alberta, Alberta Education Minister Halvar Jonson explained the purpose of the legislation was to “shift more decision making to schools, and provide for greater involvement by communities and parents.”¹

However, the theory behind charter schools was not without its critics. Charter schools, at their core, are a form of deregulation and quasi-privatization. Many considered charter schools to be yet another manifestation of the growing trend of globalization, in which the influence of democratically elected national, provincial, and municipal governments was being slowly, but continually, eroded by market forces and corporations. Some voiced fears that charter school initiatives signaled yet another blow to the teaching of common values that facilitate the creation of cohesive communities, in effect, replacing citizenship with consumer choice. Unlike democratically elected governments, charter school boards would not be accountable to the community as a whole, but to small special interest groups that, according to critics, had managed to carve out minor educational fiefdoms through the usurpation of public funds. Furthermore, critics asserted that charter school students, given the specialized nature of charter school programming, would tend to come from similar backgrounds. As a result, charter schools would create insular communities that would have little contact with people of different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds. Detractors predicted the creation of these insular communities would have damaging effects upon cohesion and belonging



Halvar Jonson, Minister of Education.

¹ Halvar C. Jonson, “Minister’s Message” in *Alberta Education Annual Report: 1993-1994*, (Edmonton, Alberta Legislature, 1994), 4.

within the wider community. Furthermore, critics worried charter schools could result in a two-tiered public education system. As evidence, they noted that despite being prohibited from charging tuition, there are often additional costs associated with attending charter schools, such as uniform costs or transportation fees. These additional costs, they assert, may effectively prohibit poorer families from enrolling their children in charter schools.

Despite these misgivings, the 1990's saw the passage of several laws allowing for the implementation of charter schools. In 1991, Minnesota became the first U.S. state to pass charter school legislation, with California quickly following suit in 1992. With 1993 came the passage of charter school legislation in six more U.S. states. This did not go unnoticed by the reform-minded, consumer choice-oriented Klein government. In 1993, Education Minister Halvar Jonson requested a report on charter schools. The report, entitled "Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools", argued that the absence of competition in the school system had led to the "failure of public schools" in Alberta.² This report would prove the first step towards implementing charter school legislation in Alberta. Indeed, Jonson would later note that 1993 was the year in which "the framework for a restructured education system in Alberta was established."³

² Beverly Lynn Bosetti, "Canada's Charter Schools: Initial Report," *Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education*, SAFE Research Series 3 (October 1998), 15.

³ Jonson, "Minister's Message", 4.

Part IV: The Klein Revolution



Ralph Klein, Premier of Alberta.

Many of the coming changes to EPS were a result of the political leadership of Ralph Klein, the Progressive Conservative Premier of Alberta. Klein, who had previously been a television reporter and the mayor of Calgary, entered provincial politics in 1989, winning a seat in the Alberta Legislative Assembly as the Progressive Conservative candidate for Calgary-Elbow. Klein quickly rose through the party ranks, securing the PC leadership following the 1992 resignation of Premier Don Getty. Under Klein's leadership, the Tories won their seventh consecutive majority government in the 1993 provincial election. Having received a mandate for his policies, Premier Klein introduced sweeping cuts and major restructuring initiatives, popularly known as the Klein Revolution.

Sensationalist headlines abounded after Klein unveiled severe budget cuts to education, social services, health, and municipal funding on January 17th, 1994. The announced goal was to eliminate Alberta's deficit and efficiently restructure the government by 1997. Several efforts were outlined in order to achieve this goal. In order to do this, the Alberta government mandated that its departments were to produce three-year business plans which outlined clear objectives and targets for spending reduction. Edmonton and Calgary hospitals were expected to reduce their expenses by \$270 million. Daycare was to have its budget reduced by \$14 million, and municipalities were to no longer receive assistance grants.

Part V: Bill 19

In January of 1994, Jonson made public his intentions to introduce charter school legislation as part of his proposed amendments to the School Act of Alberta. That same month Premier Ralph Klein announced plans to roll-back the budgets of education and health in the province between twelve and eighteen percent over a four year period. As a result of low oil prices, the Government of Alberta was running a deficit of 2.4 billion dollars; Klein was determined to balance the budget at any cost.

The timing of Jonson's announcement, coinciding with the unveiling of Klein's budget-slashing plans as it did, led many to the conclusion that the planned reforms to education were nothing but deficit-cutting measures in disguise. There is little doubt that there is at least some truth to these accusations. However, the reforms themselves were quite genuine, even if they were timed to make severe budget cuts appear more palatable. Charter school plans were introduced to the Legislative Assembly on February 10, 1994 as part of the Bill 19 amendments to the Alberta School Act.

It would be incorrect to portray Bill 19 as revolving entirely around charter schools and school choice. A major recurrent theme of the amendments was the removal of authority from local school boards and the consolidating of provincial power over education. This can be seen in various aspects of the prospective amendments: local school boards would now require ministerial authorization in the appointment of superintendents, the ability of public schools to collect property taxes was removed and given instead to the province, the number of school boards in the province was to be reduced from 140 to 60, and provincial testing measures were to be expanded. Centralizing aspects of the Bill 19 amendments did not go unnoticed; during

the debates over Bill 19, opposition MLA Michael Henry echoed a common sentiment by characterizing the amendments as a “major power grab by the provincial government.”⁴ However, attempts to centralize educational authority in the province, while important, are beyond the scope of this essay. With this in mind, the focus will be on the components of Bill 19 that had the greatest effect on the proliferation of alternative programs within EPS.

In addition to the charter school legislation, Alberta Education also revoked the right of local school boards to collect municipal taxes on property. Instead of going to local schools, the funds from the assessed properties were pooled into the provincially controlled Alberta School Foundation Fund (ASFF). Funds from the ASFF were distributed to individual schools using a formula that relied heavily on the number of students attending a given school. That is, the more students a school attracted, the more funding it received. While the funding received by individual schools in the Edmonton Public School district had long been influenced by the number of students enrolled, the loss of the ability to collect local property taxes meant schools were more dependent than ever on attracting students to sustain their financial viability. Additionally, the introduction of charter schools meant that funds would actually leave the public school district every time a student opted to go to a charter school rather than a public school. The implications of this new funding model did not go unnoticed by the conservative newsmagazine *Alberta Report*, whose writers frequently suggested that EPS’ sole motivation for establishing new alternative programs was to prevent the exodus of money that would result from the loss of

⁴ Alberta Hansard, 23rd Legislature, Second Session, April 12 1994.
<http://www.assembly.ab.ca/>.

students to charter schools. While the *Alberta Report* view is likely reductionist, the combination of draconian funding cuts and the seizure of the right to collect property taxes certainly provided ample incentive for any school district to not only attempt to retain its current student population, but to make efforts to attract students from private schools, home schools, and separate schools. And what better way to do this than to provide niche programs unavailable anywhere else?

On May 25, 1994, Bill 19 received Royal Assent. However, Jonson's vision did not emerge unscathed. During the six hours the bill was debated in the Alberta Legislative Assembly, a myriad of amendments and compromises were made. The province was unable to secure as much power as it had initially hoped; clauses allowing the Minister of Education to appoint school district superintendents were removed. Members of the Legislative Assembly also proved more leery of charter schools than Jonson. In Jonson's initial Bill 19 proposal, the provincial Alberta Education ministry was allowed full control over charter schools. However, during the debate, several amendments required charter schools to acquire not only the approval of the Minister of Education, but of the local public school board as well. The amendments also gave local school boards the ability to monitor and, if necessary, revoke the charter of charter schools. Consequently, charter schools would have to work close cooperation with local school boards. Moreover, the Members of the Legislative Assembly insisted the introduction of charter schools become a "pilot project"⁵, and introduced amendments to cap the number allowed to operate in the province at fifteen.

⁵ Alberta Hansard, 23rd Legislature, Second Session, April 12 1994.
<http://www.assembly.ab.ca/>.

With a modified Bill 19 passed in the Alberta Legislature, one might expect the first charter schools to begin operating almost immediately. This was not to be, as the province had yet to develop guidelines for Charter Schools, a process that would not be completed until the Charter School Handbook was released some twelve months later. This delay would prove to be crucial in the story of EPS alternative programs.

Following the announcement of plans to introduce a charter school system, numerous charter school societies were formed. These societies each had a vision for a school that differed from current public educational programs, and hoped to use charter school legislation to turn these ambitions into a reality. However, the unexpected delay caused by the lack of guidelines frustrated these early charter school societies, granting EPS an opportunity to attempt to convince them to opt for alternative program status under Edmonton Public Schools instead.

Education Minister Halvar Jonson confidently predicted that by the end of 1995, the charter school cap of fifteen would be reached. This prediction, however, has proven wildly inaccurate. As of 2015, not only has the cap not been increased, but only thirteen charter schools are currently operating in the province; at no point was the cap of fifteen ever met. Western University education researcher Michael Mindzak has gone as far as to call Alberta's charter school program a "failed policy."⁶ The fact that no other Canadian province has seen fit to pass charter school legislation lends some credence to Mindzak's claim. However, the correlation between the introduction of charter school legislation and the rapid expansion of alternative programming in EPS is impossible to deny. The number of alternative programs introduced between 1987 and

⁶ Michael Mindzak, "What Happened to Charter Schools in Canada?" *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no.1 (2015): 105.

1994 was zero (with one alternative program discontinued during this time span, one could even argue the actual total was negative one). By contrast, the years 1995 to 1997 saw the introduction of twelve new alternative programs. While charter schools themselves may not be thriving in Edmonton, their true legacy may be seen in the diversification of programming in the city's public school system.

Part VI: Media Reactions to the Announcement

The image shows the front page of the *Edmonton Journal* from Wednesday, January 19, 1994. The main headline is "KLEIN DROPS THE AXE". Below it are several sub-headlines and articles:

- Tory 'change' to slash \$1.3 billion** by Joan Crockett, Legislature Bureau Chief. The article discusses Premier Ralph Klein's budget cuts, including a 50% reduction in kindergarten funding and a \$4.9 million cut in special community programming.
- School Boards**: A box listing cuts to school boards, including a 50% reduction in funding and the elimination of 140 jobs.
- Advanced Education**: A box listing cuts to advanced education, including a 50% reduction in funding and the elimination of 56,000 jobs.
- Social Services**: A box listing cuts to social services, including a 50% reduction in funding and the elimination of 14 million over the next three years.
- City**: A box listing cuts to the city, including a 50% reduction in funding and the elimination of 230 million by 1997.
- Needy kids could lose kindergarten** by Corinna Schuler, Provincial Affairs Writer. The article discusses the impact of the cuts on low-income families and the potential loss of kindergarten funding.

The background of the page features a photograph of a group of children sitting on the floor, possibly in a classroom or library setting.

The *Edmonton Journal's* headline from January 19, 1994.

The announced changes to education caused alarm not just in Alberta's media, but all of Canada's as well. News articles were written that supported the implementation of charter schools in Alberta, but predominantly the media was negative in its reaction. Some said the cut-backs would place a financial burden on Albertans. The *Edmonton Journal* criticized the reductions in funding for primary,

secondary and postsecondary education in Alberta as damaging Edmonton's potential as a centre of knowledge in Canada. Others, such as the *Canadian Press*, criticized the government for transferring social costs to the Canadian federal government, who would have to pay more for education in Alberta than the Government of Alberta itself. Several newspapers, such as the *Calgary Herald* and the *Edmonton Journal*, presented depictions of the American experience with charter schools. In the *Edmonton Journal*, charter school students are described as possessing a higher level of intelligence compared to students in the public system - a system which looked down on the charter school system. At the time of this article, the American charter system experience was described as not living up to its full potential. A letter to the editor in the *Calgary Herald* argued charter schools could be destructive to the public school system, while other editorials in the *Calgary Herald* and *Edmonton Journal* were willing to give charter schools a chance. This is not a comprehensive list of the opinions expressed in this time period, but does capture the nature of the arguments.

The proposed changes had the potential to completely change the nature of education in Alberta. Alberta Education's version of the three year business plan was titled 'Meeting the Challenge', and was outlined in its Annual Report for 1993 to 1994. Amendments to the School Act enabled Alberta Education to restructure educational funding. This was done to ensure that the provincial government was the primary source of funding. The logic was that if the provincial government was the primary source of funding, it could provide equal funds to all school systems, and therefore ensure equal access to quality education for all students. The rationale for reducing the number of school boards from 141 to approximately 60 was to ensure

greater decision making at the school level, and allow greater engagement of parents and communities in education. It was hoped that by restructuring the administration, more resources could be devoted to the classroom. Alberta Education stated it was motivated to undertake these changes as a result of communications with Albertans, and the initiatives it pursued were a direct result of a popular desire for change. This claim was later called into question by the EPSB.

The unofficial reaction of the EPSB toward the proposed amendments was negative. In a board meeting on January 25th, 1994, Trustee Starkman questioned whether charter schools would be more effective at providing education as opposed to the alternative programs offered by EPS. Issues were raised by trustees in regards to the redistribution of funding, and the province's intention to appoint superintendents for Alberta's school boards. Several times, the board made reference to the high quality and high standard of service that EPS provided to the community, and questioned the motivation of Alberta's government in mandating these changes. Starkman highlighted the comments made by Ron Brandt, the editor of *Educational Leadership the Journal of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development* to reinforce her opinion. According to Starkman, this article praised the high level of decentralization that existed in EPS, the ability of school principals to directly make funding allocation decisions for their particular schools, and the high level of satisfaction parents reported from their ability to participate in decision making in the school board.⁷ Other board members showed less restraint in their critiques of the amendments. Trustee Sulyma

⁷ Edmonton Public School Board Minutes. "Unofficial response to announcement of Bill 19 and funding cuts," January 25, 1994. Edmonton Public Schools Archives and Museum, 19: 2006.2.19.

predicted that the education system would suffer incalculable damage.⁸ He questioned whether it was appropriate for the province to reallocate funding in the education system, calling it “robbing an urban Peter to pay a rural Paul.”⁹

The official response from the EPSB was supportive of the intent behind the Alberta government’s proposed amendments, albeit critical of its methods. The EPSB supported the government’s need to address Alberta’s fiscal issue. Reducing the number of boards, providing financial equality amongst the school districts, increased community involvement, increased focus on accountability and the improvement of education were concepts that the EPSB supported. Critically, the EPSB believed that the proposed amendments substantially changed the nature of public education. The board felt that the amendments would hamper its ability to effectively respond to the community it served. More specifically, the board formally requested the provincial government rescind its decision to change funding practices in Alberta and abandon its attempts to gain control of the appointment of local school district superintendents. The EPSB also expressed a desire to work cooperatively with the Minister of Education in order to find an agreeable compromise.

⁸ Edmonton Public School Board Minutes. “Unofficial response to announcement of Bill 19 and funding cuts,” January 25, 1994. Edmonton Public Schools Archives and Museum, 22: 2006.2.19.

⁹ Edmonton Public School Board Minutes. “Unofficial response to announcement of Bill 19 and funding cuts,” January 25, 1994. Edmonton Public Schools Archives and Museum, 23: 2006.2.19.

Part VII: Dosedall's reforms

On July 2nd, 1994, the EPSB announced that Dosedall was appointed as the Superintendent of EPS, a role he would assume on January 1st, 1995. He inherited a school system that was facing increased pressure from the government's charter school initiative, and a decrease in funding of approximately 20% over three years. From the very beginning of his career as superintendent, Dosedall's approach to management was different. Historically, the superintendent was separated from teachers and principals by a layer of



Emery Dosedall, Superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools.

bureaucracy. Under Dosedall, however, teachers and principals experienced an increase in direct communication with their superintendent, as he made a habit of personally visiting schools. This approach to management reflected the philosophy behind the reorganization that occurred in the Central Services of EPS. In March of 1995, only a few months after becoming superintendent, Dosedall embarked on a plan to make administration more communicative with teachers and parents, and more responsive to change.

Several initiatives to change Central Services, the administrative section of the EPS framework, were pursued in Emery Dosedall's first year as Superintendent. First, he restructured Edmonton Public School's Central Services. This was undertaken with an eye to making Central Services more responsive to schools and classrooms, and increasing administrative efficiency. It was reorganized into the Central Operations, Monitoring and Planning department, and School and District Services. Second, he

increased the independence of schools, an initiative that Strembitsky had previously addressed under his leadership. Dosedall furthered the concept by shifting financial resources previously held by Central Services to the schools. This allowed school administrative staff greater independence in making decisions that were responsive to the needs of their own schools. To complement the increased freedom provided to schools, Central Services provided schools the option of buying administrative services. This essentially created an additional stream of revenue for Central Services, and allowed schools the freedom of choosing where to purchase administrative resources.

The second initiative allowed principals direct communication with the superintendent by removing an entire level of the reporting structure. He achieved this goal by eliminating the six assistant-superintendent positions, thereby increasing efficiency. The final initiative was a substantial increase in alternative program diversity. This happened despite the Alberta government's reduction of funding for education, and will be discussed in Part IX.

Part VIII: The Renaissance of Alternative Programming

Emery Dosedall did not restrict his activities to administrative reform; the energetic superintendent also undertook an aggressive program of promoting the merits of alternative programs under EPS. On January 25, 1995, he personally contacted representatives of all community groups known to be eyeing charter school status, attempting to sell them on the advantages of seeking alternative program status instead. The advantages of operating within EPS were numerous: it would be much easier to find teachers, finding a building to house the program would be far less

problematic and costly, and there would be less pressure on parents to constantly raise funds. Moreover, Alberta Education had not yet released its charter school guidelines, leaving charter school hopefuls in limbo and Edmonton Public as the only viable option. Despite the numerous advantages that came with alternative program status, however, making a deal with EPS was often seen as an undesirable compromise to the autonomy that charter school proponents so often prized. In many cases, the strongest advocates of charter schools drew their zeal directly from negative experiences with the public school system. They could therefore be hesitant to engage in a partnership with an organization they viewed as having failed them. In spite of this, Dosdall's campaign to win over charter school societies was largely successful. On April 25, 1995, for the first time since 1986, a new alternative program was approved by EPS. As if to emphasize this momentous shift in approach, not one, but three new programs were given the green light that day: the Nellie McClung Program, the Cogito Program, and the Edmonton School of Ballet program. All three had been initially conceived as charter school proposals.

The Nellie McClung program was the brain-child of Edmonton accountant John Masson. Masson was the chairman and founder of the Nellie L. McClung Educational Society, an organization devoted to bringing an all-girls junior high school to Edmonton. The Nellie McClung society argued adolescent girls performed



John Masson, Chairman of the Nellie L. McClung Educational Society.

much better without the “distraction” of boys. School uniforms were to be mandatory, as the focus on fashion promoted by the absence of a dress code was considered yet another distraction students would be better off without. Moreover, the curriculum of the all-girls program was to be “feminist”, as it included modules on women’s history and “sexual harassment.”¹⁰

Masson initially had his heart set on a charter school, declaring in January of 1995 “one way or another, we’ll get a charter.”¹¹ Yet as the months went by without any news on the long awaited provincial guidelines for charter schools, Masson entered communications with EPS. After months of discussion, Masson and Edmonton Public came to an agreement that would see the Nellie McClung program implemented as an alternative program of EPS. Edmonton Public School administrators, for their part, characterized the proposed Nellie McClung program as “able to function well within the district”, and “not likely to raise gender discrimination concerns or challenges.”¹² Unfortunately, the use of colourful language had long been bred out of Canadian bureaucracies.

The Nellie McClung program opened in September of 1995, attracting 70 students. By September of 1996, that number had more than doubled with 170 girls enrolled in the program. As of 2015, the Nellie McClung Program continues to operate as an alternative program under the aegis of EPS. Masson, however, resigned from the Nellie McClung Educational Society board in 1996 amidst complaints the program

¹⁰ Bill Rankin, “Girls only school plan goes to board,” *Edmonton Journal*, April 19, 1995.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.ae.talonline.ca/>.

¹¹ Vicki Hall, “Girls-only public school planned to open in Sept.,” *Edmonton Journal*, January 30, 1995.
<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.ae.talonline.ca/>.

¹² Emery Dosdall, “Request for Nellie McClung Alternative Program,” April 25, 1995, (Edmonton Public Schools Archives and Museum: 97.13.18).

“hadn’t worked out the way [he] hoped.”¹³ He left with ultimately unrealized aspirations of founding a hockey-centric charter school, which, according to Masson, would serve as a de facto all boys school. Girls would be discouraged from attending by making participation in full contact hockey games a mandatory part of the program.

Another in this initial wave of new alternative programs was the Cogito program. The Cogito program has its roots in the



Cogito Charter

Students in the first year of the Nellie McClung program, 1995.

School Society. Cogito, latin for “I think”, is an appropriate name for the society and the program, as its proponents emphasized the value of a “traditional” approach to education that largely coincided with that of an era in which Latin still had a prominent place in the curriculum. The Cogito Charter School Society hoped to start a charter elementary school that focused on homework, “teacher directed” learning, a “knowledge-based” curriculum (that is, lots of memorization), and discipline. Like the Nellie McClung society, they envisioned a program with mandatory school uniforms.

Despite initial plans of operating as a charter school, the Cogito Charter School Society experienced a change of heart after discussions with EPS; in short order, the

¹³ Joe Woodard, “Edmonton’s public board gives ground,” *Alberta Report* 23, no. 39 (1996): 42.

Cogito Society submitted a formal request for EPS alternative program designation. As in the case of the Nellie McClung program, the union between Cogito and EPS is directly attributable to delays in the province's issuing of charter school guidelines. Leif Stolee, a key advisor to and "author of the basic principles"¹⁴ of the Cogito Society had harsh words for the province when the guidelines were finally released in late April of 1995, a date he felt was simply too late to be of any value to the Cogito Society. Stolee, a strident critic of the "progressivist" approach to education he saw as having been in place since the late 1960's, was apparently less than delighted by Cogito's marriage to EPS. In April 1995, he bitterly complained that the provincial guidelines were something "any half-wit could have worked out six months ago."¹⁵

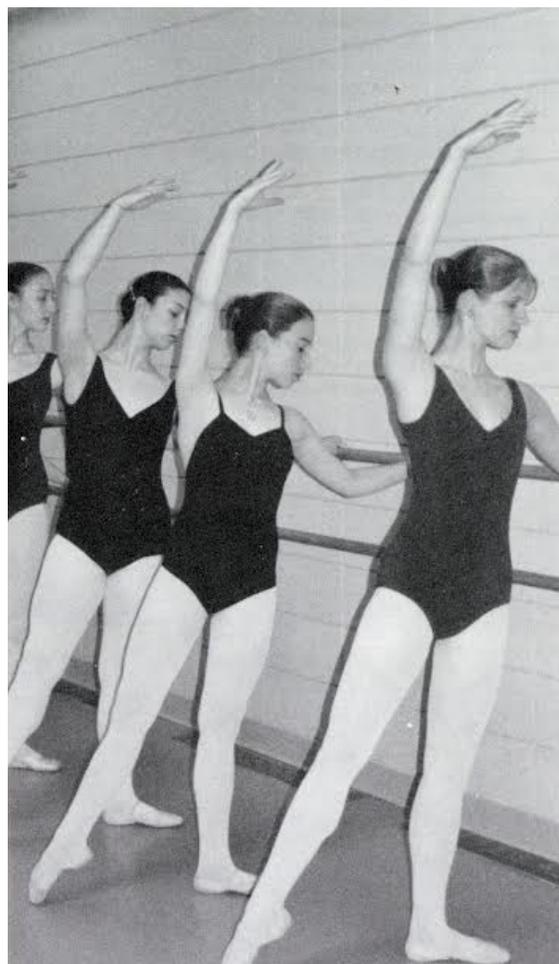
The Cogito alternative program began in September of 1995, eventually expanding from an elementary program to a K-9 program. Stolee's anti-"progressivist" leanings were clearly shared by a minority Edmonton parents, as three more publicly funded traditional schools would open their doors over the following two years: the Aurora Charter School, the Traditional alternative program, and the Logos Protestant Christian program were all up and running by September of 1997. That the Aurora Charter School was formed after the Cogito program was introduced demonstrates that certain parents preferred charter schools even if a similar public program was being offered. To this small group, the autonomy of charter schools from public school boards was just as important as in-class pedagogy and instructional modes.

¹⁴ Leif Stolee, "Cogito school rejects faddish, failing theories," *Edmonton Journal*, September 25, 2005. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/>.

¹⁵ Michael Jenkinson, "Strange timing on charter school regulations," *Alberta Report* 22, no. 21 (1996): 37.

The third of the initial three alternative programs, the Edmonton School of Ballet, was the least contentious. This alternative program was designed to allow students who wished to pursue a professional dance career to spend more time studying by eliminating the time spent shuttling between school and dance studios. The Edmonton School of Ballet initially sought to obtain a charter, but was approached by EPS to discuss the possibility of becoming an alternative program. Negotiations proved successful, and the Ballet alternative program was up and running in October, 1995. Even in its first year, the school was able to attract many students from outside the district, including Miyouki Jiego. In 1995, the 16-year-old Jiego left her Windsor, Ontario, home to attend the Ballet alternative program in Edmonton and further her ambitions of becoming a professional dancer.

The ballet program was quickly followed by other athletically focused programs. The Sports alternative program and Hockey alternative program both launched the following year. In general, athletically focused programs have proven less controversial than those based on pedagogy. In contrast to Stolee and Masson, Margaret Flynn, the head of the Alberta School of Ballet, had no reservations when it came to a union with EPS. This is likely because athletic programs do not possess the



Students in the Alberta School of Ballet program, 1995.

same overt political or ideological motivation as the conservative, traditional programs advocated by the likes of Masson and Stolee.

The wave of new alternative programs continued into 1996, the year in which the most polarizing of the alternative programs was introduced. The Logos program began life as The Edmonton Logos Society, yet another society aiming to establish a charter school. The Logos Society was chaired by University of Alberta economics professor Bruce Wilkinson, and had a four person board consisting of two other University of Alberta professors (one retired) and Leif Stolee, a retired principal also known for his work with the Cogito Society. The Logos Society envisioned a school for Protestant Christian students with Christian teachers and staff, and a learning environment infused with a general Christian ethos. Perhaps as a result of Stolee's involvement, the Logos program mirrored the 'traditional' pedagogical approach of the Cogito program.

The Logos Society offered simple but persuasive arguments for its right to exist as a publicly funded program. Catholic parents can send their children to publicly funded religious schools, so why are Protestant Christians denied the same right? Furthermore, EPS was already funding a religious school: the Jewish Talmud Torah School. Unlike the Nellie McClung Society or the Cogito Society, Wilkinson and company actively courted EPS, seemingly preferring alternative program status to charter school status, and with good reason. Under the School Act, it would likely not have been possible for a religiously oriented school to obtain a charter, as the act prohibits charter schools from being "sectarian" in nature. However, the same act allowed local school boards to authorize an alternative program that "emphasizes a

particular language, culture, religion or subject matter.” It was clear that if the Logos program wanted public funding, it would likely have operate as part of EPS.

In their pitch to EPS, the Logos Society was careful to emphasize the number of students (and therefore, money) the Logos program was expected to attract. Wilkinson argued that many families who had shunned the secular public system in favour of the Catholic school system, private schools, or homeschooling could be enticed to return to EPS by the prospect of a tuition-free, Protestant Christian education. In January of 1996, the EPSB voted 8-1 in favour of adopting the Logos Society’s proposal as an alternative program.

Unsurprisingly, many were quick to voice their displeasure with this turn of events. Amongst them were University of Alberta elementary education professor Dr. Joseph Kirman and journalist Liane Faulder. Kirman voiced concerns that granting the Logos program alternative program status set a dangerous precedent. He painted a grim picture for the future of education in the city by arguing that a proliferation of faith-based schools would result in religious discrimination against teachers, less money for all schools, and children routinely bussing across the entirety of the city in order to attend the school that catered to their niche. Faulder levelled similar criticisms and warned of the dangers of social fragmentation, asserting “true tolerance comes from rubbing shoulders with the unknown, not viewing it suspiciously from the other side of the fence.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Liane Faulder, “Tolerance tough to teach in a splintered school system,” *Edmonton Journal*, February 1, 1996. <http://search.proquest.com/>.

The Logos program also drew criticism from less expected corners: other Christian schools. The Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISAC), a group composed primarily of Christian schools, opined that the lack of tuition fees for the Logos program could cause up to half of students “to be drawn out of present Christian schools.” They also voiced concerns that, as a part of the public education system, the brand of Christianity being offered by the Logos program would necessarily be watered down and “innocuous.” Bluntly, AISAC felt the Logos alternative program would harm ‘genuine’ Christian schools while offering nothing to truly devout Christians due to the inherent weakness of their non-denominational approach to Christianity.

Despite the rancour that surrounded its inception, the Logos alternative program has become a fixture in EPS alternative programs. In the interim, the Logos program has expanded from its initial K-9 program to a full K-12. As many had anticipated, the Logos program did indeed set a precedent for publicly funded, faith-based alternative programs in the district. Edmonton Christian School, Millwoods Christian School, and Meadowlark Christian School, all EPS alternative programs, were established in 1999, 2000, and 2004, respectively. However, the doom and gloom prophesying of Kirman did not quite come to fruition, as the number of students enrolled in Edmonton Public School faith-based alternatives remains a small minority of the EPS student population.

Part IX: The relationship between Edmonton Public Schools and Charter Schools

The relationship that formed between charter schools and EPS provides context for how alternative programs were incorporated in the school system. Sections 24.1 and 24.7 of the 1994 amendment to the School Act, also known as Bill 19, established

and governed the existence of charter schools in Alberta. The amendment established EPS as an authority over any charter school applicants in their district area. In an effort to outline the details of the relationship, Alberta Education released the Charter School



Students in the Glengarry Elementary Arabic language alternative program, 1983.

Handbook on April 21st, 1995. Any community groups that were interested in establishing a charter school were required to have community support. To gauge this, charter schools were required to have a minimum of one hundred and twenty five students willing to enroll to even be considered.

Regulations established Alberta Education as the final arbiter of charter status, and established EPS as the overseer in the city of Edmonton. Once community support was established by the group, its first step was to approach the EPSB. EPS determined whether their style of education could be accommodated in the public system as an

alternative program as defined under section 16 of the charter legislation. If the program could not be accommodated as an alternative program, they were considered for charter status. Ultimately, whether or not a charter proposal had school board approval, it was meaningless without the consent of the Minister of Education. According to the revised School Act, the power of approval was put into the hands of the minister. If a charter proposal received approval, the school board was mandated by the government to ensure that the objectives in the charter school's own charter were met and Alberta Education guidelines were adhered to. If the charter school failed to meet this criteria, EPSB could revoke their charter status.

The EPSB evaluated the applications of several alternative program hopefuls. Attaining alternative program status depended on reaching agreement with EPS over financial issues, administrative issues and staffing issues. In June of 1995, three charter proposals were considered by the EPSB: Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre, the Heritage School Program, and the Suzuki Elementary School. All of these applications were declined alternative program status by the EPSB, however every application was also distinct. The Boyle Street Co-op was not prepared to conform to the policies established by EPS. The Heritage School, which focused on students with disabilities, did not wish to change its administrative structures and required a higher student-teacher relationship than EPS could offer. Moreover, there were concerns about the ability of EPS to provide the speech therapy required by the Heritage School. The EPSB also voiced concerns that the Heritage School did not fit the legal definition of an alternative program, due to its focus on the disabled. Finally, the Suzuki Elementary School, a music school, was rejected by the EPSB based on its desire to

maintain its relationship with the Society for Talent Education, an independent organization that offered musical education with “Suzuki method” instruction. Suzuki Elementary wished to only enroll students who had prior Suzuki-style education, or students previously enrolled at the society. Because Suzuki Elementary School’s policy was exclusionary of the majority of the population, EPS rejected alternative program status for Suzuki Elementary and called into question their bid for charter status. This is not to say that these charter applicants are inherently bad or inferior. Simply, they did not share the same values put forth by EPS.

Part X: Conclusion

EPS has a long history with alternative programs. Strembitsky introduced the idea of alternative programs in Edmonton in 1974. Alternative program diversity did not flourish until after the 1994 Bill 19 amendments to the School Act, which reduced funding and allowed for charter schools to exist in Alberta.

It is necessary to exercise caution when evaluating the impact of Bill 19. While it may be tempting to credit a far-sighted, sagacious provincial regime for the wide variety of alternative programs offered by EPS, such a conclusion is deeply flawed. Regardless of the Klein regime’s intent, combining reforming measures with extreme reductions in funding created an environment in which the affected organizations were set up to fail rather than encouraged to succeed. The increased organizational efficiency and program offerings that followed the Bill 19 amendments were unique to EPS; these developments were not paralleled in other Alberta school districts. As such, the credit for successful internal administrative reforms and the

increase in educational diversity belongs to EPS, an organization whose dynamism and progressivism is epitomized by tireless Superintendent Emery Dosedall.

Soon after Bill 19 amended the School Act, Emery Dosedall was appointed the superintendent of EPS. He implemented sweeping changes to the administrative structure and ultimately oversaw the rapid expansion of alternative programs. Some of the first programs after 1994, such as Nellie McClung School, the Logos Program and Cogito were met with controversy when they were included into EPS. A framework, mandated by the legislation, dictated the relationship between EPS and the charter school system. Three programs, the Heritage program, the Suzuki program and the Boyle Street Co-op were individually assessed, but were not accepted into EPS as alternative programs.

Though only Strembitsky and Dosedall were discussed, the efforts of countless individuals produced the highly praised system that continues to serve Edmonton to this day. In 1996 Calgary Public Schools embarked on a restructuring of its own administrative system similar to EPS. Their restructuring did not go as far as Edmonton's, but it still established EPS as a model system. School systems from all over the world, such as Hawaii's school system, have come to EPS in the hopes of achieving the same high level of education that Edmonton enjoys.

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