

Choice in Alberta Education: Challenges and Opportunities for Public Schools

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Executive Summary

This research paper provides a broad overview of the Alberta public school system by focusing on current challenges and opportunities. It provides a brief historical account of the development of public schools in Alberta. As well, it documents the overarching aims and scope of contemporary public school operations. While complex learning needs have largely outpaced supports, Alberta's public schools are committed to student-centred learning, relationships and community, student success, and fostering thriving and empowered citizens.

A distinct feature of the K-12 policy context in Alberta is the primacy of “choice in education.” That is, the choice for parents to choose among competing school systems – whether it be public, separate (Catholic), francophone, charter, private, or homeschooling. In turn, Alberta is said to have the widest array of “school choice” in all of Canada. However, this paper explores the ways in which “choice in education” is specifically enacted by public school authorities in Alberta. Through research interviews with Superintendents from eight public school divisions, this research determines that public schools in Alberta are realising choice through a variety of mechanisms and strategies.

For instance, public schools in Alberta harness *economies of scale* to provide a wide range of programs and services to students in more cost-effective ways. Furthermore, “choice” is enhanced through *community involvement and partnerships* by tapping into community relationships and resources that can creatively and resourcefully augment unique learning opportunities for students. Public schools in Alberta also conceptualize “choice” as a matter of *diversity and diversified learning opportunities* that are designed to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of learners. Educational policy, practices, and programming based upon *open school boundaries* within public school divisions also enable students to attend schools outside their designated catchment areas—and thereby, fostering choice and allowing families to select schools that best align with their educational preferences. Public schools in Alberta also have the flexibility to offer *locally developed courses*, reflecting the unique needs and interests of their communities. *Innovative funding models and priority budgeting* practices are also encouraged to manage public school finances efficiently and diversify programming options. Programmatic choice, therefore, is thought of as a means to ensure public *assurance* and confidence in public school provisions.

While there are barriers to establishing choice in schools, by focusing on programmatic choice, rather than systems-level choice between school authorities, public schools can ensure equity and inclusivity by ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to a high-quality education that responds to learners' needs.

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Scope & Methodology

This research paper aims to provide a broad overview of the Alberta public school system by focusing on current challenges and opportunities. In particular, it explores the ways in which “choice” in education is enacted by public school authorities in Alberta. This study recognizes the diverse nature of public schools across Alberta, and therefore, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. Given the extensive scope of Alberta’s public schooling system and the resources available for this study, it is unfeasible to comprehensively study every public school division within the province. Consequently, this study narrows its focus to a cross-sectional representation of public school divisions, which provide a snapshot of the broader educational landscape in Alberta.

A significant portion of this study is based on desk-based research, which involves the review and analysis of relevant literature, including Alberta Education, Alberta Teachers’ Association, and public school division reports and websites. By examining these documents, we gain insights into the official policies, guidelines, objectives, and outcomes of public education in Alberta. The literature review further entails a review of historical data and scholarly works related to Alberta’s public education system. This step aims to contextualize the research within the existing body of knowledge.

Methodologically, this study incorporates a qualitative research approach through in-depth interviews with Superintendents from eight public school divisions in Alberta. These include: Aspen View Public Schools, Edmonton Public Schools¹, Golden Hills School Division, Grande Prairie Public School Division, Medicine Hat Public School Division, Prairie Rose School Division, Red Deer Public Schools, and Sturgeon Public Schools. These interviews, conducted between January and July 2023, serve as a primary source of data collection. They represent a well-rounded and diverse perspective of public school operations across the province that include both small/rural contexts and urban/metro divisions. While efforts have been made to include diverse school divisions, some regional nuances may not be fully captured in this study. A larger sample of Superintendents were invited to participate in this research; however, it is important to acknowledge that this sample size may not fully represent the entire diversity of public school delivery in Alberta. In turn, the study’s findings are heavily influenced by the quality and availability of data disclosed through the interview process. Ultimately, interviewed participants offer valuable insights into the practical aspects of educational administration, policy implementation, and the unique challenges and approaches demonstrated by individual school divisions across Alberta. Additionally, this study is supplemented by findings from survey research conducted in June 2022 (for a related study by Public School Boards’ Association of Alberta), involving eighteen Alberta public school divisions.

¹ Interview conducted with the Managing Director of Instructional Supports for Edmonton Public Schools.

By delineating the scope and methodology of this research, we aim to provide a transparent foundation for our exploration of Alberta's public school system, recognizing the complexities and inherent limitations.

Defining Public Schools

Public schools are defined by Cambridge Dictionary as “a free school, supported by taxes, and managed by local representatives” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Similarly, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) states that, “In Alberta, public education refers to any K–12 educational program that is paid for entirely by public funding and governed by publicly elected school boards” (ATA, n.d.) Public schooling is fully paid for in Alberta by public funds through a combination of property taxes and provincial revenue. It is commonly understood as an “essential service” or “public good” that is to be freely accessible for all. This suggests a particular set of relations in which the government is responsible to its citizens for the provision of education. Public schools, moreover, are governed through democratic means (in the form of publicly elected school boards). In turn, this long-standing ideal of public education presumes “both a democratic purpose and a democratic governance of schools” (McNeil, 2002, p.244).

For the purposes of this report, it is important to distinguish public schools (the focus of this report) from other types of schooling in Alberta. Public schools provide educational programming to any student living in the designated area, and they must accept all resident students and all others if there is space and/or program availability. Public schools teach the Alberta curriculum and may offer optional programming to meet local demands (e.g., sports, languages, arts, etc.). Separate schools are part of the broader public system (along with public and francophone schools) that operate under the same programming and accountability requirements, but offer a fully faith-based (primarily Catholic) curriculum and school environment. Francophone schools can be public or separate, and are specifically mandated to uphold French language, culture, and identity.

Charter and private schools signify two other key types of schooling in Alberta. Despite receiving substantial government funding, private and charter schools do not constitute public education since they are not accountable to the electorate (in the form of publicly elected school boards) nor are they obligated to accept all students. Charter schools are autonomously operated schools that are mandated to provide educational programming with a particular focus or teaching approach that is generally considered not to be offered in the public system. However, the educational approaches and programming found in charter schools can and often do occur in public schools (Riep, 2020). Charter schools receive the same level of operational funding as public schools, although they oftentimes charge additional fees and employ restrictive enrolment practices that represent a real impediment to access (Riep, 2020). Private schools in Alberta include non-funded registered and non-funded accredited private schools, but the most prevalent type are accredited-funded private schools that offer provincial programs of study. Private schools in Alberta are permitted to charge tuition fees, at an unregulated rate, that

oftentimes range anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000 or more (Riep, 2022). Home education programs are also growing in Alberta. These include both non-funded and non-supervised options as well as funded programs that are supervised by a school board or accredited private school operator.

K-12 education in Alberta, therefore, represents a combination of schooling systems: public, separate, francophone, private, charter, and home education. The operations of these different systems often time overlap in some contexts, while remaining unevenly distributed in other settings. What differentiates public schools from separate, francophone, charter, private, and home schools is their universal coverage across the province. Public school boards must accept any student living in their geographic area, regardless of circumstance, academic ability, specific learning need(s), socio-economic status, or any other identifying factors. The same cannot be said of other schooling systems in Alberta.

Alberta's K-12 Public Education System: History and Development

The development of public education in Alberta pre-dates the province itself, rooted in schools supported by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). While these schools were generally private or religious in nature, they were encouraged and sometimes funded by HBC (Ell, 2002). These schools set the stage for the Canadian government to enact prototypes of public education systems in 1870 upon the creation of the North West Territories. Resolutions to govern schooling in the area soon followed, including early actions to establish the residential school system (Chalmers, 1967). By the 1880s, a Council of Education had been established, along with denominational schools that reflected the interests of both Roman Catholic and Protestant settlers and borrowed from the Ontario system; the ordinances set in place by this council would form the basis of public education in the province when it entered Confederation (Ell, 2002).

In 1905, Alberta joined Confederation, inheriting both the North West Territories' ordinances and over 500 school districts (Ell, 2002). The public school system and its aims were shaped by the evolving needs and values of the new province, a response that would continue throughout the century. As immigration increased, schools focused not only on reading, writing, and arithmetic, but on assimilation to both the English language and Anglo-Canadian identity (von Heyking, 2006). The administrative structures that would shape Alberta's public school system, such as provincial funding, curricula, and teacher preparation programs were set up in this period, with the founding of the Alberta Teachers' Alliance following shortly thereafter (Ell, 2002). Schooling was predominantly rural through the 1930s and 1940s, with teachers responsible for all grades within larger rural school divisions (Ell, 2002). Although education funding fell in this period because of the Great Depression, by the postwar period public education would see a time of major growth.

Immediately following World War II, Alberta's public education system was plagued by teacher shortages and school closures, resulting in system-wide changes to keep schools open like allowing married women to teach (Chalmers, 1967). The flourishing of the post-war economy soon increased Alberta's investments in public schools, responding to polling from the Social Credit League that identified improving public education as a chief concern among Albertans (von Heyking, 2006). This impacted both physical schools and approaches to education: resources like libraries and gymnasiums became more commonplace, classrooms replaced one-room schoolhouses, and major investments made by the government earned Alberta schools an international reputation (Ell, 2002). These investments were made possible by the general sense that education was a critical public good, viewed, in the words of Berghofer and Vladicka (1980), as "access to opportunity" (Ell, 2002, p. 51).

This perspective continued throughout the 1970s, which remained a prosperous time in Alberta (Ell, 2002). The 1970s also saw increased interest in inclusive education. Some supports had been implemented during the 1950s, such as special classes for immigrant students in Calgary public schools, but these options were few and unmaintained (Gidney & Millar, 2014). Though schools in the 1970s continued to struggle with a lack of specialist teachers, the 1978 Carriere case set the stage for including students with disabilities in classrooms (Ell, 2002), foreshadowing trends in public education to come and demonstrating the view that public education *could* become an inclusive system.

However, in the 1980s the perception of public education shifted; according to Ell (2002), "public education was no longer perceived simply as something good" (p. 63). This shift resulted in changes to the education system, including increased funding and legal support for private schools (Ell, 2002). Following the 1974 decision to tie private school funding to public school instructional grant amounts, education in Alberta took an increasingly "neo-liberal" turn – in line with market-based reforms rooted in competition and choice (Harrison & Kachur, 1999; Riep, 2022).

Contemporary Outlook and Aims of Public Education in Alberta

This history demonstrates changing visions over time for the role of public education in Alberta, with beliefs about education shifting with societal changes. Today, public school boards in Alberta highlight their aims for public education through their missions, visions, and guiding principles. A representative sample of 20 public school board mission, vision, and value statements was analysed, featuring school boards of varying size from across the province. Four key themes emerged, demonstrating the values that underlie public education today from school boards' perspectives: student-centred learning, relationships and community, student success, and fostering thriving and empowered citizens.

The most common theme (appearing 31 times across all statements) is a throughline from the movement towards inclusivity in the 1970s: student-centred learning. This theme focuses on public education through the lens of students as unique individuals, while ensuring that “students come first” (Calgary Board of Education, 2023, Values section, para. 1). Through this lens, “learning is personalized for all students” (Chinook’s Edge School Division, n.d., Vision section, para. 1), encouraging teachers and school boards to engage with the specific needs of each student.

Relationships and community are the second most common theme, appearing in 24 instances. This theme demonstrates a clear intention on the part of public schools in Alberta to prioritize relationship-building and a sense of belonging within their schools while being engaged members of local communities. For example, Black Gold School Division (2023) describes their vision to “embrace and sustain the families and communities that surround us, and they in turn support and grow with us” (Vivid Future section, para. 2). This illustrates that public education is seen by school boards as a “public good” that should be integrated into whole communities, with schools and communities engaged in reciprocal relationships.

The third theme was student success, mentioned in 22 statements. While success is not clearly defined in these statements, some imply a broader definition beyond academic success, such as Westwind School Division’s (n.d.) mission of “striv[ing] for personal excellence” (Mission section, para. 1) and Pembina Hills School Division’s (n.d.) value statement of “success for every student” (Together section, para. 1). Thus, delivering quality educational experiences that enable unique versions of student success lies at the heart of public education today.

The final theme, fostering thriving and empowered citizens, lays out a specific goal for the purpose of education with 17 statements total. Echoing the needs and values of society today, these statements describe fostering “caring citizens in a changing world” (Palliser School Division, n.d., Mission section, para. 1) and “compassionate and innovative global citizens” (Chinook’s Edge School Division, n.d., Vision section, para. 1). With citizenship education as a stated goal in Alberta’s curriculum (Alberta Education, 2005), this theme marks the evolution of previous models of citizenship education in the public school system’s history within an increasingly diverse province.

When taken together, these themes show a contemporary outlook on the character of public schooling in Alberta, as well as an expansion in the role of public schools over time. In the early 20th century, citizenship education was focused on assimilation into Anglo-Canadian perspectives, whereas today’s public schools aim to engage diverse classrooms in global citizenship. Inclusive education was the subject of court cases in the 1970s, whereas school boards today explicitly call for individualized supports for all students. The common missions, visions, and values stated by school boards can therefore be seen as responding to the increased complexity of teaching in Albertan classrooms today.

Scope of Public School Operations

As Albertan society and perspectives on education have shifted, the scope of public school operations has had to account for these changes, particularly changes in enrollments, demographics, and classroom complexity.

Between 2018 and 2022, Alberta's overall student population grew from 730,375 students to 766,280 (Government of Alberta, 2023a). This growth resulted in increases across most school authorities, including public, separate, francophone, charter, and private. In 2022/23, the share of Alberta students enrolled in public schools was 66% of the entire K-12 population (Government of Alberta, 2023a). Looking at teacher-to-student ratios (and not just enrollment growth alone), however, is critical to understand shifts in the scope of public school operations. In 2003, Alberta's Commission on Learning responded to class size concerns with the Class Size Initiative, that "earmarked funding to enable school boards to meet class size requirements" (Thomas, 2008, para. 5). Maximum average class sizes were recommended as follows: 17 students in Grades 1-3; 23 students in Grades 4-6; 25 students in Grades 7-9; and 27 students in Grades 10-12 (Thomas, 2008, para. 3). When the program ended in 2019, Alberta Education reported that their aim to reduce class sizes to the recommended limits was not achieved. An analysis of reported data by Sean Dunn (2019) found that "had 2900 teachers not been hired and retained as part of the Class Size Initiative, the proportion of K-3 public students enrolled in 2018 in a class size of 23 or more would be at least 87%, compared to its actual 2018 value of 37%" (p. 3). They also concluded that enrollment growth in schools (and especially in metropolitan schools) had outpaced the funding provided by the end of the program, resulting in larger class sizes (Dunn, 2019). These findings were affirmed by the Alberta Teachers' Association (2022) in a pulse survey, which found that "4 in 10 teachers have class sizes over 30+ students" and "64% of teacher respondents note that they have significantly larger class sizes when compared with last year" (p. 2). When broken down by school board, only 5 of 61 boards met the previous recommendations for K-3 classrooms. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Alberta's public schools are tasked with delivering quality education to increasing numbers of students without a proportionate increase in teachers to maintain recommended teacher-pupil ratios.

Classrooms in Alberta are also increasingly complex. With the movement towards inclusive classrooms and demographic shifts in the province, by 2013 classes were "twice as likely to include a significant number of students with special needs and twice as likely to include students learning in a language that is not their mother tongue" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2022, p.3). Even in rural schools with smaller class sizes, classes remained complex because of the frequency of multi-grade or multi-course classrooms (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2022). Furthermore, 85% of teachers "reported an increase in the complexity and diversity of student needs in their classrooms from last year" (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2022, p. 2), particularly in the area of social-emotional, cognitive, and behavioural needs. Of note, the ATA (2022) found that this data holds across large urban, medium-sized urban, and rural settings, indicating that teachers in all geographic areas are supporting increasingly complex classrooms. Students with complex learning needs are often impacted by a range of multi-layered issues, such as mental health,

relationships, behavioural, physical, medical, sensory, communication, and cognitive challenges. In turn, teachers have identified the need for increased supports, with 56% of respondents indicating a decline in supports for these students, and over half reporting that timelines for assessments (such as speech, occupational or physiotherapy, or psycho-educational) would take over six months or would not be complete within the school year (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2022). As student complexities continue to rise, increasingly overstretched teachers are required to employ parallel teaching tasks to address the range of complex learning needs in class, with unmatched supports.

In part, these findings suggest the need for cross ministerial collaboration in order to connect Education with Health and Family Services, addressing issues related to complex needs in a timely manner and providing effective support for students and teachers within the public school system. As Mark Davidson, the Superintendent of Medicine Hat Public School Division, observes:

We need less bifurcated, less siloed services where ministries in Health and Education can collaborate so to provide interventions directly in schools that are holistic and accessible to all – so that something like a speech impediment, for example, does not create an unneeded challenge in a child's learning that may persist for the rest of their life if the parents are low-income and do not have the financial security to take time off work to regularly transport their child to a clinic... [Instead] these complimentary ministries should shift how they operate to meet the needs of kids where they are at.

In turn, service delivery models for public health and education that – to some extent are embedded, rather than divided – can help meet the complex needs of children and youth in more accessible, holistic, and efficient ways.

Choice in Alberta Education

A defining feature of the Alberta context in which public schools operate is the ideology, governmentality, and policy of “choice in education” (Government of Alberta, 2020). Indeed, the province is said to have the “greatest degree of school choice” in all of Canada, according to a cross-Canada comparative analysis by the Fraser Institute, *Measuring Choice and Competition in Canadian Education* (Clemens, Palacios, Loyer & Fathers, 2014). Since 2019, the Alberta government has taken further steps to facilitate the expansion of “school choice.”

Choice in K-12 schooling has come to mean many different things, however. At a minimum, choice means giving parents the right to choose the specific public schools their children attend, rather than having them assigned to a school based on place of residence. However, it also represents a broad type of educational restructuring whereby government funding follows students to their school of choice—public or not. Illustrated by the *Choice in Education Act*, legislated in 2020, the Government of Alberta is intent on further developing *systems of choice*

through increased support to charter, private, and home education programs. Many of these options receive partial or full public funding, including charters (100 per cent operational funding), registered privates (up to 70 per cent operational funding), and notified home schools (approximately 20 per cent). The *Choice in Education Act* has also prioritized the expansion of new charter and private schools through liberalized regulatory reforms. The goal of these reforms, as stated by former Education Minister, Adriana LaGrange, is to replace the previous “patchwork of different types of school divisions with different powers... [by creating] a level playing field” (LaGrange, 2019) among all school providers. The *Choice in Education Act*, therefore, is about expanding parental choice in education through a provincially-subsidized marketplace of providers that are both public and private.

Aspen View Public School Superintendent, Neil O’Shea, argues that “...our government uses that term ‘choice’ to devalue the public education system, saying, ‘see, [public schools] aren’t giving you the choice,’ so let’s create other systems for parents to choose from.” In turn, provincial funding and authority are increasingly handed over to private providers in the name of more “choice.” Yet, this “choice” may come with additional costs to citizens in the form of user fees, as well as undermining a public system that has been established to serve as a “societal good” with democratic purposes.

Yet, choice in education is something more than increasing the number of schooling systems available to students and families. Choice in public schools is about enhancing the diversity of unique learning opportunities in public school settings. In doing so, public schools administer choice in education, at a variety of levels, in a variety of ways. The remaining sections of this report will analyze and conceptualize several aspects of “choice” embedded within Alberta’s public schooling system based on research findings from interviews with public school Superintendents from across the province.

Recontextualizing Choice in Public Schools

Economies of Scale

In education, economies of scale refer to the average cost of providing educational services in relation to school characteristics including the size of an individual school and size of a school district. It is measured as the operating expenditure per student. The rationale for consolidating schools and school districts is largely based on the expectancy that as the student population increases, the operating costs to provide educational services, in turn, will decrease. It has further been observed that cost reduction can be achieved by schools and districts sharing regional facilities and administrative services without actual consolidation (Monk, 1990). A large body of research has demonstrated that public education systems can produce significant economies of scale due to their associated size (Chakraborty, Biswas, and Lewis, 2000).

In a context like Alberta where provincial policy is driven by the idea of “choice in education,” economies of scale are an important factor to consider since greater economies of scale allow for the maximal utilization of finances in service of creating choice. In Alberta, the issue of economies of scale is even more acute since funding is directly tied to enrolment. As the Superintendent of Golden Hills School Division, Bevan Daverne, explains:

More enrollment means a larger economy of scale, typically. This means that you have more choice about what you’re able to offer students. Small schools cost more per student to educate than larger schools. And so, if we can grow our system it helps to reduce standard operating costs, so that we can offer more choices to students.

Hence, public education systems with higher levels of enrolment are strategically positioned to leverage economies of scale in favour of greater choice, since the operating costs required to expand programs and services are more cost-effective when they are dispersed among a larger student population.

Public school divisions in Alberta, however, encounter dissimilar factors related to size, geography, and scale of operations that impact the economics of provision. The Superintendent of Grande Prairie Public School Division, Sandy McDonald, describes it as an inequity of costs related to choice.” He states:

There is a cost of choice – a financial cost – when you require specialized staff and facilities. Being in the City of Grande Prairie, we have a geographical benefit. It’s easier to get around from school to school, so we can hire specialized music teachers, for example, and build a program that has them in three different schools during the school week. These specialized teachers can travel between schools, and it’s quite easily managed in our school division.

On the other hand, public school divisions in Alberta that mainly consist of small schools that are spread over larger geographical areas are hampered by their ability to consolidate facilities or share resources, which in turn, can reduce advantages offered by economies of scale.

An important feature of the *Choice in Education Act*, is that “choice” is conceived as a choice between systems (that is, the parental choice to decide among competing systems). However, this conception of choice can actually limit choice in schools. As the Superintendent of Aspen View Schools Division, Neil O’Shea, explains:

The other thing we run into when we talk about school choice, is choice for parents does not always equate to more choice for students. In fact, what it does is limit the choice that students have in school. It becomes more difficult to offer in two systems, what could be offered in one. [...] Our rallying point is that we’re ‘better together’ – not separate. For example, let’s say you have a high school with 300 students where we offer a fairly robust shop program and some creative CTS

[Career & Technology Studies] in arts, drama, and so on. But, if we were to take 150 students out of that high school and put them in a Catholic school, a charter school, a private school, or a combination – now our enrollment is cut in half. At that rate, it would be nearly impossible to offer the same variety of programs. And what you have, is a system across town that doesn't have the capacity to offer a variety of options, either. Instead, they're all competing for the same resources, competing for staff, and so on and so on. So, we don't need to split into multiple systems because that limits everybody.

Running competing school systems in the same area that are both provincially-funded, in turn, can limit the economies of scale that can be achieved—thereby, resulting in the ineffective management of resources. Systems-level choice based on segregated operations, therefore, can result in cost-inefficiencies that can impede rather than expand actual choice in schools. As Superintendent of Medicine Hat Public School Division, Mark Davidson, states, “you can create choice under one roof; it doesn't need to be siloed-off into different facilities.” As a matter of public policy then, boosting economies of scale in the public system offers more opportunities to maximize choice for the greatest number of students in the province.

Choice through Community Involvement and Partnerships

Community involvement and partnerships play an important role in efforts designed to enhance the programmatic choices offered by public schools. From stakeholder input to local expertise to joint use agreements to institutional collaborations, public schools engage with the broader community in a variety of ways to supplement the programs they offer.

Firstly, public schools attain stakeholder input through a range of techniques in order to strengthen choice in educational provisions. For instance, “school councils work to support parental involvement in the school community and enhance student learning” (Government of Alberta, 2023b). School councils provide an avenue for parents as well as community members and stakeholders to offer advice to principals and school boards regarding service delivery and programming. Additionally, school trustees are publicly-elected officials that advocate for children and quality education, they are goal-setters for their school systems, they are educational planners and evaluators, they are policy makers, and they are communicators that interact with the many publics that have a stake in education.

To meet the diverse learning needs and interests of students, parent-led school councils and publicly-elected school trustees represent an important bridge between the school and the broader community. As Superintendent of Aspen View School Division, Neil O'Shea, explains: “The voice of the trustees is extremely important because they are the ones working within their communities. They are the ones hearing from their community members and stakeholders, and understanding the needs of what's happening in their communities.” Likewise, Sturgeon Public Schools Superintendent, Shawna Warren, explains that “Public schools belong to the communities we serve. And so, we're always seeking parent feedback and listening to our trustees. We value feedback from our school communities to ensure that we're offering

programming that meets the needs of our local context.” In addition to parental feedback and advice from school trustees, principals frequently administer surveys to students in order to solicit student voice on the types of programmatic options they wish to see offered in their school. As noted by Golden Hills School Division Superintendent, Bevan Daverne, establishing relationships among school principals, staff, students, and parents allows for “information gathering and sharing that’s much more helpful in determining how parents and students view choice, and what are the important things to fix, change, or enhance in your school.”

Secondly, choice in public schools is further implemented by leveraging local experts with unique skills that can apply their knowledge and proficiency in ways that extend learning experiences and opportunities for students. This may involve community experts that can run a course, for example, in woodworking, dance, or marine biology. As the Superintendent of Aspen View School Division, Neil O’Shea, states: “In rural Alberta, we tend to rely heavily on the expertise in our communities to enhance programming that we offer in the public system.” Specialized programming can also emerge in response to unique community priorities. The possibilities for innovative educational programming that is based on community priorities and expertise is exemplified by Sturgeon Public School Division’s STEAM programming. This STEAM programming aims to one day leverage the science and technology related to hydrogen power by tapping into the expertise found in the up-and-coming Edmonton Region Hydrogen HUB. With plans for “more than 25 projects related to the production, transportation and end use of hydrogen,” (Edmonton Region Hydrogen Hub, 2023, para. 3) including the largest hydrogen plant in the world that is expected to be operational by 2024, the Superintendent of the Sturgeon Public Schools, Shawna Warren, explains that “we’re looking to partner with key local stakeholders to ensure our students learn this technology and actually experiment with it.” Warren adds that, “in response to what’s happening in Sturgeon County with hydrogen power, we want to collaborate with our municipal partners so our students get in on this cutting-edge technology, and we want to connect it and put it into our education programming.”

Thirdly, public schools in Alberta frequently employ “joint use” or “community use” agreements to enhance learning opportunities for students. These agreements typically occur between a school and a town/city, municipality, community organization, or non-profit organization for the purpose of sharing space or facilities. Superintendent Reagan Weeks of the Prairie Rose School Division explains that:

In small communities, sometimes our schools are so small we have under 50 students in them. And when you're trying to create educational experiences that match our urban counterparts, it requires some critical thinking and some creativity. We typically can't create those sort of learning experiences without community partners and access to community facilities. [...] Those partnerships then also deeply embed the school into the community that it serves. So, it is a reciprocal arrangement.

For example, schools in the Aspen View School Division, explains Superintendent O’Shea, “develop as many partnerships with community groups as possible. Generally, this involves accessing recreational facilities such as community skating rinks, curling rinks, swimming pools,

baseball diamonds, cross country ski trails, and in Athabasca a formal agreement to use the multiplex.” These school-community partnerships are designed to supplement programming options to students by sharing community space and facilities. They typically allow for enhanced physical education and athletics programming but may also include partnerships to gain access to local fire departments, community halls, and libraries that offer additional learning opportunities to students.

Fourthly, public school authorities engage in a variety of institutional collaborations and partnerships to improve student choice in education. For example, Fort McMurray Public School Division has established land-based education camps in partnership with the Athabasca Tribal Council and McMurray Métis so students have the opportunity to experience traditional land-based learning. Another example of institutional co-operation is demonstrated by Prairie Rose Public Schools, Medicine Hat Public Schools, and Medicine Hat College, which have partnered so that smaller schools without shops can utilize college facilities for welding, carpentry, and mechanics. By establishing connections between public school divisions and public universities, a deliberate flow of students from secondary to post-secondary institutions can occur based on dual credit systems. In 2023, Prairie Rose Public Schools and Medicine Hat College partnered again so that high school students have the opportunity to enrol in the Health Care Aide program to address “the shortage of healthcare workers in rural communities” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023, para. 1). Moreover, an example of cross-ministerial collaboration is demonstrated by the partnership between Medicine Hat Public Schools and Alberta Health Services, which have established an outpatient treatment program for students struggling with depression and anxiety. Institutional cooperation and partnerships, therefore, are a common approach for public school authorities to augment programs and services.

Choice as Diversity in Programming

Public school superintendents in Alberta conceptualize “choice” as a matter of diverse programming and diversified learning opportunities. Choice *as diversity* recognizes the need for flexible and responsive learning environments that meet the changing needs of learners and the contextual differences within each learning community. It involves providing a broad horizon of learning opportunities that allow students to explore their interests and preferences. In turn, this translates into context-specific, non-standardized programming based on greater diversity of public school offerings. Superintendent of Prairie Rose Public Schools, Reagan Weeks, makes the argument that diversified programming can contribute to equity and excellence in education across the board, stating:

Occasionally, there is such a fear that if we develop a specialized program, or any kind of exceptionality in any sort of way, that we somehow compromise equity. But I would argue that things become more equitable when there are pockets of excellence because that can spread. So, is the equity we’re trying to achieve, something that is mediocre for everybody? And, I would argue ‘no,’ that what we’re after is creating the types of learning environments that meet the needs of a very diverse population and we might not need to do that in the exact same way that

somebody else is having that need met. [...] I don't think equity and creativity should be mutually exclusive, and when they are not, I think that really great things can happen.

Establishing choice in public education, in turn, involves innovations that are designed to enhance diversified learning opportunities and meet the diverse needs of learners. As Neil O'Shea of Aspen View Public Schools highlights, "...it's the diversity within our communities that strengthens us as a public school division."

Choice through Open Boundaries

Open boundary policies within and between school divisions further strengthen choice by enabling students to access a wider network of programs and services. Outside of Alberta, the rules around place of residence and attendance are tighter in other provinces. Yet, many school jurisdictions in Alberta offer their services to students outside of their catchment area. Consequently, transportation is a primary issue that must be addressed resourcefully and efficiently to facilitate choice through open boundaries. In the case of Golden Hills School Division, for example, this meant changing bussing procedures so that out-of-area students could access schools of choice freely, through public transportation. As Superintendent of Golden Hills, Bevan Daverne, explains:

We tried to have our board think about it differently. That it was more than just getting rid of transportation fees. Here was the bigger plan: We were going to develop a transportation system in our communities where we could provide access to schools that have their own unique character, like a sports program or leadership program or arts or French immersion. And our approach was to provide transportation that goes to all of them to increase choice, so that it's not just a choice between public or Catholic, it's a choice to go to Westmount or Brentwood or Wheatland Elementary.

Programs of choice with specialized learning opportunities that are operated by one school are oftentimes opened-up to accommodate learners with unique interests from other schools within a division. This type of school-to-school collaboration has enabled division-wide art programs, language programs, sporting programs, and a wide array of Career and Technology focused programs that expand access to programs of choice within a division. As Sandy McDonald of Grande Prairie Public School Division explains: "it's about both the equity of access for individuals, but also equity across schools within the system as well. We want to minimize those barriers and we also want to make sure that we're promoting equity amongst all of our schools."

Edmonton Public School Division considers itself a "division of choice" with a wide range of programmatic options for students. In doing so, Edmonton Public Schools has implemented "Campus EPSB"—an innovative initiative that allows students to take semester-long courses at another high school or industry site.

Students can travel to another school or industry site for a semester to immerse themselves in an area of study that excites them—it's a great way for students to explore opportunities and get hands-on experience to help them plan their next steps. (Edmonton Public Schools, 2023, para. 1).

“Campus EPSB” follows a post-secondary campus model, but for grade 10-12 students that can access a variety of programs across the city in an open boundary environment. Students enrolled in the program earn high school credits and industry credentials, while preparing for post-secondary education. City of Edmonton transit Services is the preferred method of transportation for students registered in Campus EPSB programming. Some of the “immersive learning” opportunities that students can pursue through “Campus EPSB” include automotive services, community care, cosmetology, culinary arts, aviation, renewable electrical technologies, carpentry, electrical and pipe trades, iron working and millwrighting, and performing arts. Hence, choice in public school divisions can be expanded through open boundary initiatives that extend access to adjacent programming and learning opportunities.

Choice as Locally Developed Courses

As noted by public school superintendents in Alberta, locally developed courses provide another avenue for school authorities to provide “unique learning opportunities to help meet the needs of students and communities” (Government of Alberta, 2023c). School authorities have the flexibility to develop or acquire locally developed courses for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students, with the purpose of providing educational opportunities that supplement and/or go beyond provincial programs of study. At the senior high level, some examples of the type of locally developed courses that are available to school authorities, include: Autobody Repair, Cybersecurity, Design Thinking for Innovation, Fire Rescue Services, Forensic Studies, Yoga, Applied Graphic Arts, Band, Dance, Guitar, Film and Media Art, Musical Theatre, Sculpting, Arabic Language and Culture, Dene Language and Culture, Filipino Language and Culture, Tsuut’ina Language and Culture, Astronomy, Bioethics, Epidemiology, Global Economics, Journalism, Paleontology, Social Emotional Wellbeing, Traditional Land Based Learning, and Surviving Financially as an Adult. As Alberta Education highlights, locally developed courses may be used to: (1) accommodate the needs and interests of students, (2) encourage and support innovative learning and teaching practices, (3) address unique community priorities, (4) engage students at risk of leaving school early, and (5) promote successful transitions to further education by exposing students to advanced subject matter and learning environments (Government of Alberta, 2023c). The list of locally developed courses that are available continues to grow as more are developed by school boards and approved by Alberta Education. In turn, they can be used by any school authority in the province to enhance choice in education.

Choice through Self-Sustaining Finance

Programs of choice offered by public schools often time require additional funding because of specialized programming that involves cost-intensive labour, materials, and/or facilities. To ensure the success and sustainability of a specialized program of choice, public school authorities employ a variety of financing methods.

Fee-based systems are a common way to cover supplementary costs for specialized programming that require higher operating costs. These are typically “Academy” programs in public schools, such as a Hockey Academy, Dance Academy, or Flight Academy. Superintendents interviewed for this research indicate the rationale for fee-based programs is simply based on the idea that these programs should “not take money out of the system that impact other schools and services,” as stated by Sandy McDonald of Grande Prairie Public School Division. Further explicated by McDonald, for example, various public school boards in Alberta offer Montessori programming:

...which has an adult to student ratio that triples what would exist in a traditional elementary school, where one teacher and two or three educational assistants will be working with a multigrade class to support the experiential, hands-on learning in Montessori that those students require because they're younger. The Montessori program has a significantly higher staffing complement than any other school that we can allocate to a more traditional school. That's where the fee based preschool programming comes in and the fees that are collected for that will offset the extra staff that are required.

Specialized programming of choice that require additional costs to run, therefore, often rely on fee-payment schemes. A variety of mechanisms, however, are used to alleviate cost-related burdens associated with fee-based models. These often can include a reduction in fees, delay of fee payments or flexible payments, and pro-rated systems based on need.

Moreover, public school boards regularly operate education foundations or funds to supplement provisions. These pools of extra finance can be used to support students and families for which fees present a barrier to accessing programs and unique learning opportunities. Schools also generate supplemental funds through fundraisers, donations, sponsorships, and contracts with vending machine operators as well as grants from not-for-profits and charity. This combination of funds, in turn, can be used to offset additional costs for specialized programming. Furthermore, it is the practice of public school boards to never take anything related to school fees to collections. Instead, cooperative solutions are managed with high success.

Still, any type of fee-based program represents a form of privatization since user fees are tied to access. It is a practicality, however, that many of these programs require additional financing arrangements that are not funded through ministerial budgets. Moreover, some academics point out that sponsorship deals with private companies and “new philanthropy” that is used to secure additional funds further contribute to privatization processes by making public education increasingly dependent on private funds (Ball, 2008; Ball & Youdell, 2008; Hatcher, 2007; Hogan & Thompson, 2020).

By contrast, speciality programs are often considered a priority by public schools and divisions, and thus, fully supported so not to be offered as a fee-based program. In the case of Medicine Hat Public Schools, Superintendent Davidson explains that:

We have no real Academy structures like you might find elsewhere. Our board has been pretty committed to the notion that if we do offer anything that it needs to be at no cost or low cost so that any family can access it. And, if there is a cost there has to be a mechanism, that's well understood by the family, that if they don't have the resources, they're still able to access it. So, for example, we have Sports Institutes at Alexander Middle School, but they're not programs where kids in a basketball program just flow together and sort of form a separate track within the school. It's more of a robust option offering and the costs associated with that are far lower than the Academies in our region. But we use all kinds of mechanisms to make sure that everyone can be in it if they want.

Indeed, internal management related to strategic planning and budgeting that prioritizes universal access to unique or specialized programming, represents another method to ensure steady funding for such programs.

Choice as Pedagogy

In Alberta schools, a significant distinction between curriculum and pedagogy is the level of embedded choice. While curriculum is provincially mandated and therefore less flexible (with the exception of opportunities like locally developed courses), pedagogy remains at the discretion of the teacher. Thus, employing a wide range of pedagogies offers choice that can help adapt curriculum to the needs of specific learners in varied contexts around the province. As Superintendent Golden Hills School Division, Bevan Daverne, explains, pedagogy enables schools to be “responsive, more responsive at the universal level and more willing to engage in that kind of differentiated thinking for kids at the universal level.” Pedagogy is therefore a conduit for choice in Alberta schools, with teachers able to respond nimbly to the unique needs of the learners in their classrooms and the broader context of their communities.

Choice as Assurance

A key consideration among interviewed Superintendents in Alberta is the notion that choice is about public confidence and assurance in schools. As Superintendent Sandy McDonald of Grande Prairie Public Schools, explains “...what makes people confident in what we do is directly related to the choices we offer, and how we respond when needs are identified.” Reagan Weeks, Superintendent of Prairie Rose, further explains that:

Schools have an obligation to meet the needs of the student population that they serve [and] the key piece that is required is listening to understand the context and

then crafting an exceptional learning environment to fulfill that need. And so, that requires a responsive, contextualized learning environment in public schools. If public schools fail to do so, then people will fill that need in another way.

Hence, the underlying premise of school authorities is to “maximize student growth and achievement” and “respond to the learning needs and diverse circumstances of all students” (Sandy McDonald citing Alberta Education’s *Assurance Framework*, 2023). In working towards such ends, choice is conceptualized as both a methodology and indicator of assurance.

For example, choice is put into practice by public school authorities through “site-based” administration. As Superintendent Daverne of Golden Hills explains:

See, we're not just providing choice to our parents. We're providing choice to our administrators and our principals. They can make the choice, and if they lose students because they're not providing choice, not being responsive, not providing high level programming, they have to figure out how they're going to cut staff to make that work. Alternatively, if they attract more parents then all of a sudden, they've got more money to do different things. So that individual school character, the thinking about: what can I do to make my school the number one choice in the community? What could I add with programming that parents and students would appreciate that doesn't exist somewhere else? Or, what could I duplicate that does exist somewhere else that's awesome, without losing advantages that I have in other areas?

Giving school administrators more choice and autonomy in how funding is allocated is a “site-based” model that embraces competition and accountability. “So, we encourage principals to be creative and innovative with programming. We encourage them to be more responsive to the student body, to the parent community.” Disparities can occur across site-based models due a variety of factors. However, public school programming that is responsive to the diverse needs and aspirations of the learning community is an indication of local assurance and accountability.

Challenges to Choice in Public Schools

Despite public school efforts and tactics designed to facilitate diverse learning opportunities, “there's an inequality in our province around what kind of programs students have access to,” explains Neil O’Shea of Aspen View Public Schools, “limited by all kinds of things, limited by lower enrollments, limited by teacher expertise, limited by resources, and so on.” This section will briefly outline a number of these factors.

Schools with lower enrollment, including smaller schools or schools located in less populated areas, often face challenges in offering a wide range of programs. Since provincial funding is tied

to enrollments, these schools often have less resources at their disposal that can limit their ability to hire specialized teachers or offer specialized courses.

Yet, it is not just small school divisions that are impeded by factors related to resources. Given the “weighted moving average” funding formula in which funding is tied to enrolment, but on a 3-year average that does not accurately reflect up-to-date enrolment numbers, schools that are growing are not funded adequately. This weighted moving average funding formula was criticized by interviewed participants, as Managing Director for Edmonton Public Schools, Ann Parker, highlighted that it “stretches resources even thinner.” Indeed, growing school boards – which represents a wide majority in Alberta – are inversely impacted since the new funding formula does not properly fund enrolment growth, but rather does the opposite.

Resource allocation is a significant factor in educational opportunities and inequalities. Schools with more funding may have better facilities, more up-to-date equipment, and access to a broader range of extracurricular activities and programs. More funding can also be used to hire additional staff and offer more programs. This can create disparities in educational experiences for students across the province.

Geographic location also impacts possibilities for choice. Since rural and remote schools typically have less opportunities to share resources with nearby partners and providers, this in turn can limit the types of specialized programs they can offer. Transportation issues, particularly in rural or geographically spread-out areas, can also limit students' ability to access programs in other schools.

Teacher expertise in specific subjects or programs can significantly impact what is offered in a school. Specialized courses ranging from shop class to non-English language courses are teacher-dependent. Hence, if qualified personnel with diverse skill sets are unavailable to teach specialized programs, choice in programming can be limited.

Administrative decisions made by school boards and educational authorities also play a crucial role in programmatic offerings. If these decisions prioritize certain programs or schools over others, it can result in disparities.

Finally, a focus on systems-level choice at the provincial level can impede actual programmatic choice in public schools. By establishing more systems for parents to choose from, the cost-efficiencies and economies of scale associated with public education are diminished by operating parallel systems in the same jurisdiction.

To address these inequalities, there are a number of steps that can be taken. For instance, implementing policies and initiatives at the provincial level aimed at equitably redistributing resources (for example, defunding private schools and removing the weighted moving average funding formula) can reallocate funds more appropriately. By extension, grant-based programs administered by Alberta Education or public school boards could be established that specifically assign financial resources to schools for the purpose of enhancing choice *in* public schools, rather

than funding choice *between* school systems. Additionally, flexible funding arrangements in which school boards and schools have enhanced discretion to use funds as they so choose – with accountability measures in place – can further support learning opportunities that are responsive to the needs and interests of the school community. Retaining qualified teachers in underserved areas and providing increased support for schools represent other strategies to improve service delivery. Additionally, efforts to involve parents, communities, and educational stakeholders for the purpose of increasing access to programs and resources are essential in promoting a high-quality and inclusive public education system.

Leveraging “Community Assets” to Cultivate Choice: A Case Study of Prairie Rose Public Schools

Encompassing a large geographical area in southeastern Alberta, Prairie Rose Public Schools serves a mainly rural population in the communities and regions of Cypress County, County of 40 Mile, M.D. of Acadia Valley, Special Areas, Town of Redcliff, Town of Oyen, Town of Bow Island, Village of Foremost, Village of Empress, and the Village of Ralston. In total, the division serves approximately 3,300 students in junior kindergarten to grade 12, across eighteen Public Schools, eighteen Hutterite Colony Schools, and a high school distance learning centre. Even though Prairie Rose Public Schools are located in predominately small rural settings, the Board has established a “wide range of unique educational programs that are designed with [the Division’s] rural culture and context in mind” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023b, para. 1). These include programs that focus on aviation and technology, firefighting, farming/agriculture, rodeo/equine, athletics, entrepreneurship, and fine arts.

A central aspect of PRPS’s approach to developing unique programs of choice is performing a “community asset inventory,” explains Superintendent Reagan Weeks. This involves taking stock of people, places, and community partnerships and supports that can help launch and sustain a program that is tailored for its particular context. For example, Superintendent Weeks explains that, “one of the world’s best flight schools is located right in our backyard. So, it’s really about doing an asset inventory in your community and what you already have and how we might be able to build upon that.” As a result, Prairie Rose Public Schools, in partnership with Super T Aviation, has developed the Dave Rozdeba South Alberta Flight Academy. This one-of-a-kind high school program allows students to earn their private pilot’s license along with their high school diploma. The program will also offer the opportunity for students to complete their commercial pilot’s license while they are still in high school. Moreover, students in the program have had the opportunity to build a plane from the ground up, which has then been used for flight instruction. The South Alberta Flight Academy operates from Eagle Butte High School and Medicine Hat Airport.

In 2023, the South Alberta Fire Rescue Academy (SAFR) was the newest academy program launched by Prairie Rose Public Schools. Working in partnership with local community fire departments, the program provides students at Senator Gershaw School (Bow Island) and Eagle

Butte High School (Dunmore) in grades 11 and 12 with the opportunity to earn their Firefighter 1 and 2 Certifications. The program consists of three days per week of in-class instruction along with two days off site for hands-on firefighting training. “Firefighter training is one of the things we heard from our communities that there is a need and passion. Academies, like South Alberta Fire Rescue, give students the opportunity to learn about something they are excited about which can further be applied following graduation” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023c, para. 3). The South Alberta Fire Rescue Academy is a useful example of “design thinking” that demonstrates what can happen when community needs are linked with student learning. As Superintendent Reagan Weeks describes,

...in rural Alberta, grass fires are a major concern for every single farmer and rancher. So, we thought how could high school students gain the knowledge and skills that could help with something that is a real problem in these communities.

One of the key partners of the program, the Bow Island Fire Department, reiterated the value of this approach by stating:

We are always looking for new members and the South Alberta Fire Rescue Academy is a great opportunity to certify new firefighters and hopefully keep them in our rural communities after graduation. Our whole team is looking forward to participating and watching the program grow. (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023c, para. 5).

With the support of local firefighters who are passionate about this work, the South Alberta Fire Rescue Academy has the potential to transform the educational landscape in the communities it serves.

The Prairie Rose School Division also offers a number of agricultural programs that are relevant to the local context. These include the Foremost School Agricultural Resource Model (F.A.R.M), Senator Gershaw Farm Program, Irvine Agriculture Discovery Centre, and North Agriculture Project, which is run out of four schools (Oyen, South Central, New Brigden, and Warren Peers). These agricultural programs engage students in a variety of areas from growing crops and produce to raising livestock. Students participating in these programs develop life skills that are transferrable beyond agricultural practices, including “critical thinking, community outreach, entrepreneurialism, leadership, goal-setting, environmental stewardship, and financial management” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023d, para. 9). The Irvine Agriculture Discovery Centre, for example, “will teach sustainable agriculture practices focusing on how we will feed 9 billion people by 2050 in an environmentally sound, socially responsible and financially viable way now and in the future” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023d, para. 1). This program has the “potential to re-shape how rural education is delivered across the province and beyond” by creating a “one-of-the-kind template, backed by results to prove program efficacy, that in turn could be published and circulated to allow other rural schools to build their own ADC [Agriculture Discovery Centre]” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023d, para. 4). Indeed, unique programs of choice such as the Irvine Agriculture Discovery Centre exist in Alberta’s public system;

representing hubs of excellence that can share programmatic results and findings with the purpose of broader implementation.

Further drawing on community assets and traditions in southern Alberta, Prairie Rose offers the Foremost Rodeo Academy and Rodeo/Equine in the North (REIN) program, which is offered at Oyen Public School, South Central High School, New Brigden School, and Warren Peers School. These rodeo programs provide access to Riding Arenas and state-of-the-art equipment for student-athletes to apply their classroom instruction to various areas, including barrels, poles, roping, horsemanship, and other related topics. These programs are further supported by professional rodeo coaches.

Another program of choice in Prairie Rose School Division is the UAV (Drone) Certification and Agricultural Research Program, which prepares students to become drone pilots in the fields of agriculture, real estate, transportation, telecommunications, energy, and filmmaking. It is offered at Eagle Butte High School, Foremost School, Senator Gershaw School, and South Central High School.

In the athletics department, Prairie Rose Public Schools has established high-quality programs in both baseball and hockey. The Badlands Baseball Academy in Oyen, AB hosts impressive all-year round baseball facilities that “provide its athletes with the best education possible while teaching them the necessary skills and knowledge required to become an elite baseball player” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023e, para. 1). Similarly, the South Alberta Hockey Academy program offers a “world class education-based hockey experience” that fosters both academic and athletic competency, and involves “relationships with post-secondary institutions across North America which creates pathways and resources for student-athletes to pursue their future ambitions” (Prairie Rose Public Schools, 2023f, para. 7). This sought-after hockey program is offered at several schools in the division, including Eagle Butte High School, Foremost School, South Central High School, Parkside Jr. High School, Irvine School, Seven Persons School, and Oyen Public School.

By establishing a network of academy programs that span from athletics to agriculture to aviation to fine arts, Prairie Rose Public Schools offers a wide array of speciality programs that meet the diverse needs and interests of broader school-communities. In doing so, this “allows every student to feel connected and as though they belong,” claims Superintendent Weeks. In turn, academy programs established by the Prairie Rose School Division cultivate student interests and strengths in comprehensive ways that positively impact both academic success and mental health. Discussing the Flight Academy, for example, Superintendent Weeks noted the positive impacts and opportunities to develop resilience: “As a 16 or 17 year old thinking, ‘how do I manage fear?’ ‘How do I work as a team?’ ‘How do I exercise discipline to master these skills?’” By engaging in immersive learning opportunities, social-emotional learning is fostered among students that contribute positively to their overall success and wellbeing.

To accommodate more students into these unique programs, the division has provided bussing between schools to facilitate access to diverse programming. If students are able to access their

own transportation, students are always permitted to access programming outside of their resident area. A guiding principle of the Prairie Rose Public School model, explains Superintendent Weeks, is that “we don't believe that everything needs to look exactly the same. We believe in tailoring the education environment.” By allowing inter-jurisdictional access within an open network of diverse programs, the choices offered to students within the division are further amplified.

Many of the academy programs offered by Prairie Rose include associated costs for students and parents. If there is a student who is unable to pay the associated costs, however, there are scholarships and systems in place such as fundraising and donations, that can be used to cover expenses. PRPS Superintendent, Reagan Weeks, further explains that effective internal management that links strategic planning with finance has been key to “ensure we have what we need to provide exceptional schools. So, we work very tightly in our strategic planning with finance...so the budget is built on our strategic goals and priorities.” By leveraging the assets already present in a particular community (related to personnel/expertise and physical spaces for place-based learning) in conjunction with strategic goals and priorities that aim to offer unique programs based on student interest and local context, Prairie Rose Public Schools has developed a proven model for advancing “choice” in Alberta’s public education system.

Conclusion

This paper explores the ways in which public school authorities in Alberta think about, envision, and implement choice in schools. It finds that public schools in Alberta are realising choice through a variety of mechanisms and strategies, including economies of scale (that represent a comparative advantage), community involvement and partnerships, diversity in programming, open boundary policies, locally developed courses, innovative funding models and priority budgeting, and quality assurance and public accountability priorities.

Politically, “choice in education” has largely been viewed as a matter of systems-level choice, which prioritizes the expansion of different *systems* – increasingly resembling a sort of marketplace of providers – that parents can choose from. This approach may spur innovations through competition on account of Alberta’s quasi-voucher system, whereby provincial funding follows students to their school of choice. However, this research paper demonstrates that public schools – constituting more than 66% of the total student enrolments in Alberta – continue to work towards increased programmatic choice, which may be a more effective approach to expand educational choices to both parents and students.

Public education is committed to inclusivity and equal access. By offering programmatic choice within public schools, educational institutions can promote equity by ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to a high-quality education. Systems-level choice can create disparities by channeling resources away from public schools and potentially excluding marginalized or disadvantaged students who may not have the same opportunities. Public schools are vital for fostering democratic ideals, including community-building and social cohesion. Encouraging choice within public schools allows for the development of a more diverse and responsive public education system while still maintaining the core principles of accessibility and inclusivity. Furthermore, redirecting public funds to support systems-level choice can lead to resource disparities, inefficiencies, and redundancies. Programmatic choice within public schools allows resources to be distributed more equitably and effectively, serving the diverse needs of students while avoiding the risk of creating a dual-tiered education system.

In summary, “choice in education” should be recognized and implemented more systematically as a matter of *programmatic choice within public schools* because it aligns with the principles of efficiency, equity, accountability, and inclusivity, while preserving the strength and integrity of the public school system. It allows students and their families to make informed choice within a publicly funded and regulated framework, ensuring that all students have access to quality education that caters to their individual needs.

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