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What a New Public Education System Could Learn from Alberta

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ABSTRACT What does a successful public education system look like? How does it function? How long does it take to create and what are its underpinning beliefs and values? The Canadian province of Alberta is the highest-ranking education system in the English-speaking world. What can it teach us about how to construct a successful public education system? Given the vast chasm between basic fundamental beliefs about the purpose of education, how much the question of equity should be at the forefront of educational priorities, and the importance of democratic involvement and professional autonomy, is it even possible to create a similar model?

Canada in Context

Canada is one of the few countries in the world that does not have a national education system. Each of Canada's 10 provinces and three northern territories has its own self-governing public education system. At the same time, Canada ranks as the highest English-speaking nation in terms of both performance and equity in international benchmarks.

Since 2000 the two Canadian provinces which have scored highest in these international education tests, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) listings, are Alberta and Ontario. It is perhaps to be expected that Ontario, home to Canada's capital city of Ottawa, should lead the nation in education. Surprisingly, even to Canadians themselves, is the fact that the gas-, oil- and coal-extracting province of Alberta, with its mainly blue-collar workforce, is also up there in the world listings, often outscoring Ontario.

The province of Alberta is divided into 62 school authorities, or districts, and it is these middle-tier education authorities, known as school boards, that oversee the day-to-day running of all schools. Individual schools do not have boards of governors. Board trustees, representing wards within the district, are

elected for four years and are accountable to the community they serve. Trustees, paid over 18,000 Canadian dollars (CAD) annually, are elected to hold the system, the board and its superintendent to account, and to report system and school performance to the public and the provincial government. A recent head of Edmonton's school board was a retired train driver, though candidates are often retired education professionals. It is also seen as a way in for aspiring politicians.

Some provinces have abolished school boards, but not Alberta. Deputy Minister Curtis Clarke told me: 'We're not in the Wild West. Elected boards play an important role in reflecting the dynamics of their region, whether it be urban or rural. They are there to be responsive to the interests of all the stakeholders. I think in Alberta it works' (Clarke, 2019).

The provincial government of Alberta is responsible for the curriculum, the exams and the accountability system. Curriculum is developed with input from the provincial education ministry, subject-matter experts and teachers – and is now sold around the world. Within Alberta Education (the provincial government's education department, of which Clarke is the senior civil servant), around 80 per cent of employees are teachers on secondment who later return to their schools. The experience is thought to benefit their school and their own professional development. Retired principals and teachers (usually paid less than permanent staff) fill the remaining positions.

Historically, schools in Canada were divided along religious lines. When the Europeans first came to Canada and pushed west, the British Protestants and the French Catholics built their own schools, resulting in Protestant and Catholic school districts, both of which are enshrined in the Canadian Constitution, and exist throughout Canada. As a result, most cities in Alberta have two school boards, Protestant and Catholic. However, not all Canadian provinces have retained the faith element. In 1997, 73% of Newfoundland residents voted to abolish their Catholic school system, replacing it with a purely secular system, as a result of long-running sexual abuse of children by the province's Catholic priests (Open University, 2013).

Alberta, which is roughly the size of Norway, has a population of five million, most of whom reside in or around its two major cities, Edmonton and Calgary. Calgary is the base for American and Canadian energy company headquarters and is home to 250,000 American expats. Albertans claim that it was their presence, along with the emergence of free-market advocates within the provincial government, that from the late 1980s encouraged a number of private and charter schools to be set up, mainly in and around Calgary, which are partly paid for out of the public purse.

The response to this development from Emery Dosdall, a former Edmonton District Superintendent, was to conduct extensive public consultations, asking parents what they wanted from their public school system. As a result, the Edmonton Public School Board created 'choice' with open borders, which enables parents to send their child to any school in the district, and allows schools to run individual programmes, but within a core curriculum

that applies to all schools. The choice element also applies to the specialist programme on offer, but not to the core academic curriculum. By opening up the public system to parental choice, Dosdall successfully killed off demands to fund charter and private schools, and has ensured the dollars are largely kept inside the public system (Evans Woolfe Media, 2010a).

In practice, choice mostly affects high schools, which students attend from 13 to 18. For elementary (primary) school, the vast majority of children attend their neighbourhood school. However, all parents have the right to choose an alternative school, though children from the locality are given priority. Students do attend high schools outside their vicinity, but that has more to do with the perceived quality of the extra-curricular programme. One Edmonton school has a fine arts focus with a specialist ballet and dance programme; another in Calgary has a sports focus; another has an emphasis on science; and there are two schools with ice hockey programmes; but this is always in addition to the core curriculum. This is seen as a rejoinder to the potential attraction of private schools – why would parents want private schools with all these specialities available?

A teacher for twenty years who is still involved in education, but did not want to be named, said:

> There used to be a lot of rhetoric around school choice in Alberta back in the eighties and nineties, but it turned out to be a lot of vapour, when you actually look at the differences in results across the system. A rising tide lifts all the boats. There are a couple of academic high schools which only take the so-called high achievers, but that is a very small population.

Today Alberta is the only Canadian state that retains charter schools. While they are publicly funded, their admissions are limited and there are just 13 of them. Private schools are also funded from taxation, though only to between 60 to 70 per cent of their base funding. Just five per cent of Albertan pupils attend private schools, chiefly in the kindergarten, pre-kindergarten and special-needs sectors. Even so, Edmonton School Board, unions and other groups regularly lobby the provincial government to remove all public money from private education.

Another facet of the Albertan system consists of the extra-curricular school clubs, which are extremely popular throughout Canada. Every staff member is quietly expected to get involved in some sort of activity, such as curling, golf, swimming, Canadian football, soccer, horse riding, music lessons, chess, robotics, social justice, and even a model United Nations (UN). According to one teacher, students are encouraged to set up their own clubs and 'plan a lot of things with little staff intervention', though staff are expected to supervise and coordinate.

Alberta has only one teaching union, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), which represents both teachers and principals. All teachers in publicly funded schools must join the ATA. Over half of the union's revenue is invested

in professional development. The union lobbies to ensure there are enough learning support assistants in the classroom to support inclusive education. It runs courses to make best use of classroom learning assistants, and for those working with students with learning exceptionalities.

The ATA has considerable input into the provincial government's curriculum formation and encourages teachers to be actively involved in a network of specialist learning clubs. Former principal Jeff Johnson, who joined the Computer Council as a junior teacher around twenty years ago, said: 'If a teacher has a particular professional interest the clubs enable them to focus on their learning. In a school with 45 teachers, 30 of them will be members of a specialist council. Of those, 25 will attend its annual conference.' He recalls his former school principal encouraging staff to get involved in the Inclusive Education Council, because the principal decided the school needed to develop an expertise in that area. Of those who went to the annual conference, half would have had a passion for that subject, and half would have gone because they were encouraged to attend. Johnson supervises the Council for School Leadership, which has grown in membership over the years. 'Our annual conference is in Banff, which is one of the most beautiful places on the planet,' he said, 'but I'd like to think we run a pretty good programme too.'

In Alberta all teachers, bus drivers, canteen assistants, dinner supervisors, deputy and assistant principals and principals are contracted to the district rather than the school (Evans Woolfe Media, 2010b). The province sets pay scales for everyone in education, and there is not the growing pay gap that has emerged between teachers and headteachers in England. Top pay for a teacher with ten years of teaching is CAD99,000 (around £58,000), and for a principal it is in the range of CAD130,000 (£75,000). In urban areas, principals' pay is based on how many full-time and equivalent teachers are working in their school: the more teachers there are working for them, the more money they earn. In rural areas, pay is based on student population. The union would not countenance performance-related pay. I was told by one union official, 'We would go to the wall on that, on the grounds that it is divisive, and on what basis can it be reliably measured and calculated?'

Funding

On school funding, the dollars follow the student. Elementary school funding is calculated on the number of children who register. High school funding is based on the number of children who amass the requisite number of credits (i.e. who complete their courses and pass the diploma exams) (unlike in England, where there are so many unintended incentives built into the system to curtail students' education if they are deemed to be likely to bring a school's results down). Albertan heads have been known to optimise the amount of funding by encouraging students to take more credits than they need for graduation, but this was thought to have had an unintended positive effect, by increasing the range of courses on offer. Principals also admit that the funding system has in

the past resulted in some principals running advertisements aimed at poaching students from schools down the road, but Edgar Schmidt, a former Edmonton superintendent (2007-2013), discouraged this, arguing that it was ultimately counterproductive for the system as a whole.

Within the choice system, site-based decision making means school principals decide whether they wish to buy into the district's services. They can go outside if they wish. Also, the district can take the strain off headteachers overburdened by their catch-all roles. One principal said he did not want to be taking responsibility for a new school building or the replacement of the school boiler: he would rather the district sorted that, so that he could concentrate on teaching and learning. Eight years ago, Edmonton's schools received funding of 90 cents in the dollar, with the district taking 10 cents for its provision of services. Recently, however, questions have been asked about where government money, intended specifically to reduce class size, is going – is it ending up in the classroom, or perhaps remaining in the reserves of the districts?

For teachers who are keen to move up the managerial ladder, a sabbatical to work in the District Superintendent's office enables an aspiring leader to develop contacts and to gain an understanding of the bigger picture. This 'grow your own' culture continues all the way up the hierarchy: superintendents are chosen from among the successful and well-regarded headteachers within the district. Principals become known for their skill sets and can be moved accordingly, depending on the needs of a school.

A major cost-saving factor is that Canadian schools do not spend thousands of pounds advertising for staff in the national press. Two-thirds of job positions throughout Canada are filled through a commercial online system which applicants (as opposed to the employer) pay to use. District boards also advertise on their websites. In contrast, a parliamentary freedom of information request to a sample group of 120 English schools in 2016 revealed that an estimated £56 million, or up to £80,000 per school, is spent annually on advertising staff vacancies.

The favoured English approach to filling temporary vacancies – through supply agencies – is seen by a former Edmonton official as absurd. 'People would find that, to use a technical term, just goofy. Why would you do that [i.e. take money away from students unnecessarily]?' Alberta, like most Canadian provinces, avoids agency fees by having a substitute teacher pool. In British Columbia it's known as Teachers on Call. Principals may also have their own list of substitute teachers who are familiar with their children and their school. Some school authorities even hire teachers on contract, full time, to be available to cover for someone who is either ill, on a professional development day, or involved in an extra-curricular activity. These (fully qualified) teachers are contracted to the district to turn up as and when needed.

Bridging the Inequality Gap

Alberta scores highest in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), beating Ontario, and certainly England, in minimising the effect of a student's economic background on their educational outcome; the gap between better off and less well off is less in Alberta than anywhere else. According to Deputy Minister Curtis Clarke, while the province has equitable funding based on a common framework for all students across the province, 'the system compensates for lack of resources at home, through targeted resources', the aim being to achieve the same levels of success across the province and not just in specific areas. 'When we find there are areas of need, the boards will step up to find ways to fund that need appropriately.'

Elementary school principal Mark Sylvestre's school's intake is largely from a low socio-economic background. Consequently, the school runs kindergarten and pre-kindergarten classes prior to the official school entry at age six in Grade 1. Sylvestre meets with every parent of newly registered children to discuss in detail the needs of their child. 'I would say that most of my principal colleagues do the same for our new families coming to register. It's important to meet with the parents before they come to school and to get them to realise they're building a relationship with us for the next six to seven years, and that we want the best for their child.'

There is a big emphasis on reading recovery in Albertan elementary schools, although the exact techniques vary. In one Edmonton elementary, a highly trained teacher, with expertise in reading recovery, systematically takes children out of classes if they are falling behind. If they are still behind after three recovery programmes, investigations take place into the cause of the difficulty. In Mark Sylvestre's school, by contrast, the class teacher works with children who are having difficulty, while the teaching assistant, equipped with the necessary training, supervises the general class.

In Alberta, as in Canada generally, there is no streaming or setting of children until the age of 16. In fact, making children 'feel bad about themselves' at a young age is viewed as a form of child abuse: 'you rely on differentiation until you get to 16, right? The strategies that work for special school students are the strategies that work for all kids,' says a former teacher with 20 years' experience. Albertan teachers are highly trained and have a very low rate of attrition. They are recruited from the top third of the graduate cohort. Most have a first degree and then take an additional two-year combined Bachelor of Education degree. A third of Alberta's teachers hold master's degrees. 'We get the right people on the right bus.'

No Inspection

How does Alberta assess student performance? It is a triangulation between standardised testing (in years 6 and 9, and with diploma exams in Year 12), teacher assessment and parental choice. Provincial Achievement Tests previously took place in Grades 3, 6 and 9, in five core subjects. However, in 2009, after

pressure from the Alberta Teachers' Association, the government removed the Grade 3 test, as well as dissolving its Accountability Department.

In Alberta, students do not receive homework until they start preparing for the Provincial Achievement Exams in Grade 6. According to elementary teacher Lisa Laviolette, 'We encourage children to read for a minimum of 20 minutes each evening.' Sylvestre adds, 'My school believes that the work students do should be in the class as opposed to doing things at home, where some parents take it on themselves and do the work. We see their learning in class and are able to make assessments and give feedback on what we see.'

There is no inspectorate. Support is built into how the system operates, on a daily basis, via close interactions between the District Superintendent's office and the school, and with support from schools and principals within the district. Schools must make their results public, but Alberta Education works collaboratively with the district boards to analyse those results and find ways to improve.

Kirsteen Higson, having taught in both the English and the Canadian systems, says that Canadian teachers have more time, are less stressed and are able to fashion the curriculum to suit more personalised learning, rather than having to deliver a curriculum which may not suit some learners. During her time in England, she found that a plethora of interventions (after-school revision, parent interviews, parent information evenings) meant teachers had less energy for more creative and thoughtful planning and 'there was no time for enrichment opportunities outside the classroom'.

There are no commercial exam boards in Alberta. The public system writes its own exams. The provincial tests are devised by teachers, or former teachers, working for Alberta Education, or on secondment from their schools.

Alberta has joined with two other West Canadian provinces to provide the commercial clout to ensure that publishers print textbooks of the quality required to support and enhance the curriculum for learners and teachers.

Kirsteen Higson believes that the main difference from the English system is that in England, Ofsted, league tables, performance-related pay and external exams all conspire to put tremendous pressure on teachers to ensure students pass their SATS, GCSEs and A levels. Conversely within Alberta and Ontario, teachers are expected to do what they can to ensure students pass their courses, but it is ultimately the responsibility of the student. In order to graduate, you must have the required number of credits, and to pass a course with a credit you must have a mark of at least 50 per cent. Xanthe Couture was educated in Alberta before studying for a master's degree in England. She says a major difference is that 'everyone in the Albertan system believes they can get a piece of the cake'. Her fellow students in England often spoke about how they felt they had been in competition with their school classmates. She adds that in Alberta, students do not really feel any pressure in school until they reach 15, when they have to start choosing options for their future.

Within Alberta there are tensions, as there are in any system. A recent investigation into class-size funding has caused frustrations. Loins were girded

for May 2019's provincial elections, when an 'Albertan version of Trump' was predicted to win power, and expected to attempt to meddle with the public system, possibly advocating the introduction of vouchers. Educationalists' reaction is that there is a high degree of trust in our professions and we don't appreciate politicians who are bullies.

Alberta has a school system which seems to work for everyone, based on a belief that all children can succeed at their own level and pace if the system gives them the right tools to do so. Canadians seem to have a broader view of the purpose of education than we do in England: it is not just about helping a young person into the job market, but also about enabling all young people to be the best members of society they can be, for the good of society. It is about equipping them for life. As Curtis Clarke says: 'We're all in this together so we need to work together, and be collaborative' – just one of many lessons from Alberta that could form the basis of a new public education system over here.

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