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Enrollment dropping, Toronto schools think outside the box
Posted: February 27, 2009, 8:12 PM by Rob Roberts



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By Dave Bowden, National Post

Kim Fry knew exactly what she wanted for her daughter Brighid: a school that would integrate environmental education with social justice, and involve the community groups in her Dufferin Grove Park neighbourhood. She had discussed the idea with friends and fellow parents for years, but “didn’t think it was very feasible” to find a school within the public system that would address her needs. She had even considered homeschooling.

So when she and a few like-minded parents finally held an information meeting about a proposed new alternative school, they were pleasantly shocked when 200 other parents showed up. In September, Brighid, 6, and at least 80 other students will start Grade 2 at the Grove Community School.

“Clearly, the new alternative school really resonated with a lot of people who are looking to stay in the public system but may be dissatisfied with certain aspects of public education,” Ms. Fry said.

Retaining dissatisfied parents has become a key part of the Toronto District School Board’s efforts to curb declining enrolment. The TDSB has lost approximately 12% of its student population since 2001-2002, almost 33,000 students, more than double the 5% decline province-wide. Private schools across the province have added nearly 7,000 students in the same period – a 6% bump.

At the TDSB, a movement is growing for new alternative or specialty schools, and they have a fan in the board’s new director of education.

Dr. Christopher Spence, introduced at a press conference this week, told reporters that specialty schools help retain and attract students. He touted the success of the “programs of choice” instituted under his watch as director of education in the Hamilton public board, citing Sports Academy, a program at R.A. Riddell Elementary School.

“The enrolment of that school has gone way up. We’ve now attracted kids

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wave of the future.”

The board currently offers nine arts-focused programs, six sports programs and 11 programs that focus on technology, math or science. In addition, 37 alternative schools take educational approaches that cater to different types of students. For instance, the Triangle Program creates a comfortable atmosphere for students that are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, while four Year Round Alternative schools allow students to opt in or out of school at four intervals throughout the year.

Three other alternative schools open their doors for the first time this September: the holistic Whole Child School, the much-debated Africentric Alternative School and the da Vinci school, which puts as much emphasis on physical education and art as on traditional subjects like math and science.

There are likely more to come. Trustee Bruce Davis this month began pushing for the creation of new specialty programs called “magnet schools” – so named because they attract parents and kids. The board already boasts 40 specialized programs throughout its 560 schools.

Mr. Davis convinced fellow trustees to vote for a report on the feasibility of creating more programs, expected by spring.

“These things are successful. They’re good for kids. Parents love them,” he said. “Why aren’t we doing more?”

Peter Cowley, director of school performance studies at the Fraser Institute in Vancouver, said treating parents the way businesses treat consumers can lead school boards to ensure their supply fits demand.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that if public schools are more responsive to parental wishes with regard to the kind of schools that they want, that they will get some of the business – or they will not lose as much,” he said.

Not all parents share the board’s enthusiasm for such schools. Annie Kidder’s daughter is in Grade 11 at one of Toronto’s specialty arts schools, where she thrives in the creative environment the school provides. But Ms. Kidder, the head of People for Education, a group that lobbies for equity in education, struggles with the fact that the program gives her daughter a leg up over some students – an advantage, she said, that shouldn’t exist in a public school system.

“It’s not fair if she gets something that somebody else doesn’t get, basically based on my class, my income,” said Ms. Kidder, pictured above. “The whole point of public education was that everybody was going to be educated together and for free.”

Chief among Ms. Kidder’s concerns about specialty education is the culture of exclusivity she said it creates. Though her daughter’s school is excepted, she points out that some, like the Etobicoke School of the Arts, require students to audition to gain entry, which she said favours students from higher income families that can afford private lessons.

Too many specialty schools could lead to “socio-economic segregation,” she said.

“They actually exclude kids. That’s part of how you keep it your specialty school, you say you have to write an essay to get in, or you have to audition to get in, or you have to prove that your marks are at a certain level to get in,” she said.

“One part of me goes, ‘You can justify that because you’re making a special school for a particular kind of kid.’ The other part of me goes, ‘It’s a public education system. How are we justifying excluding kids from certain schools?’”

Margaret Wells, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education who specializes in alternative schools, sympathizes with the sentiment. But she emphasized a distinction between schools that are alternative in their approach and those that focus on specific subjects.

“The truth is there’s a huge variety of alternative schools within TDSB. I would assume that Annie Kidder is specifically thinking about programs that have



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Alternative schools focus less on specific topics and more on the way in which the curriculum is presented. Inglenook Community High School, for instance, creates what it calls a “family-like atmosphere” and uses the community assets in its King Street East neighbourhood, including art galleries and museums, to stimulate students. Downtown Alternative School, near St. Lawrence Market, developed a strategy of conflict resolution called “peacemaking” that it instills in its Kindergarten to Grade 6 students.

Schools of this sort are open to all students of appropriate age across the board. But buses are not provided for alternative schools, meaning that school populations are often made up of students who live in the area or whose parents have the means to drop them off across town.

Though they usually have student-to-teacher ratios comparable to regular schools – about 20 students per teacher at the primary level, 25 students per teacher at the senior level – the overall student populations rarely exceed 200, and in some cases are lower than 50.

This allows teaching staff to better acquaint themselves with students, not always possible in larger community schools.

Those specialized schools that impose admission requirements tend to focus on specific areas of study. Other than the Etobicoke School of the Arts, there are programs like TOPS, an elite science program, which requires students to write a two-hour entry exam.

The international baccalaureate program requires students to complete additional courses in Grades 9 and 10 to prepare them for the rigorous program, which offers first year university credits to senior high school students.

Ms. Wells conceded these schools could risk the “socio-economic segregation” Ms. Kidder fears.

“I share some of her concerns around a place like Etobicoke School for the Arts because ... you can ask all sorts of questions about who has the economic and cultural capital resources to get through an audition,” she said. “Usually you wouldn’t be able to pass an audition unless you had access to out-of-school lessons.”

Trustee James Pasternak defends the specialized schools model. He argues that students with the aptitude to excel in certain areas should have the opportunity to do so in the public system.

“If you’re going to have a high-end ballet school focusing on dance,” he offered as an example, “you have to have people with the basic skill sets and potential to be able to participate in that type of program. You need some kind of a screening process.”

Ms. Kidder advocates instead putting the current system under a microscope to ensure that specialty programming does not expand at the rest of the system’s expense. She fears such programs detract from what she called “our collective responsibility to make all of our schools work for all students.”

“That is complete and unadulterated hogwash,” said Mr. Davis.

He argued that the number of students in alternative schools is relatively low – only about 5,000 students in a board that, despite declining enrolment, still totals about 240,000. He admitted that relatively few students reap the benefits of specialty programs, but said those in traditional community schools aren’t lacking.

Mr. Cowley noted that alternative and specialized programs give parents an important voice in education.

“I believe strongly that parents should have the right to seek out whatever education they feel is most appropriate for their children,” he said.

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