

Have School District Responses to the Passage of Choice Legislation Resulted in Increased School Choice?

When the Government of British Columbia introduced Bill 34 in April 2002, catchment boundaries became permeable throughout the province. As a result of this “choice legislation,” school boards created registration and transfer policies for students wishing to attend public schools outside of their catchment areas. As educators in B.C. schools, we wanted to know the responses of three public school districts to choice legislation, and to determine whether school choice has increased since Bill 34. We wanted to find out:

- What new program choices have emerged within these three districts since the implementation of choice legislation?
- How has choice legislation affected enrollment numbers of individual public schools and districts?

The debate on the topic of school choice, in essence, is between the proponents and the detractors of choice programs. The educational debate that exists between the comprehensive neighbourhood school model (detractors) and the market-based choice model (proponents) is essentially a debate between equality and freedom. Freedom has to do with the belief that the rights of the individual are most important. Equality has to do with the belief that all individuals have the right to be dealt with in the same way (Bartlett, Craig & Sass, 1989). The tension between freedom and equality is fundamental to the distinctions between the left and right in the political spectrum, as well as the critical distinction between proponents and opponents of school choice. This tension helps explain why the current debate over choice schools generates so much controversy.

The three districts that agreed to participate in this study were: North Vancouver, Richmond, and Maple Ridge – Pitt Meadows. Quantitative data collection was limited to the secondary schools within each of the three districts. Qualitative data, in the form of twelve interviews, was collected from the following: ten people who work in central offices, one principal, and one trustee.

An analysis of the registration and transfer policies for the districts of North Vancouver, Richmond, and Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows revealed that each district has created policies and processes, which comply with Bill 34, that uniquely respond to the realities present within its boundaries. The researchers noted that, according to interviewees, few new programs have been implemented as a result of choice legislation. The secondary school program offerings in the three public school districts show the following two similarities: an increase in the number of students enrolling in French immersion programs, and the creation of a sports academy in each district.

The districts of North Vancouver and Richmond have experienced a decrease in overall enrollment numbers over the last five years, while Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows has seen an increase in enrollment. Table 1, which shows individual school enrollments, provides an interesting comparison between the overall enrollment trend for each school district and the individual school enrollments that comprise the district. The individual school enrollments were analyzed by calculating the average percentage change in enrollment in the three years before Bill 34, in the two years after Bill 34, and for the overall five-year average. The data show that despite overall enrollment numbers dropping in the districts of North Vancouver and Richmond, certain schools are

experiencing growth rates disproportional to the district averages. One explanation for the enrollment changes is the movement of students.

Table 1 Individual School Enrollments (Regular Programs)									
Note: Regular Programs do not include French Immersion or International (both are District Programs).									
Type	School Name	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	3 Year Average (Before Legislation)	2 Year Average (After Legislation)	5 Year Average (Overall)
North Vancouver School District (No. 44)									
Reg	Argyle	1287	1276	1356	1296	1277	2.7%	-2.9%	-0.1%
Reg	Balmoral Jr. (8-10)	419	439	414	372	362	-0.5%	-6.4%	-3.4%
Reg	Carson Graham	1315	1294	1212	1209	1156	-4.0%	-2.3%	-3.1%
Reg	Handsworth	1119	1157	1149	1141	1102	1.4%	-2.1%	-0.4%
Reg	Seycove	644	658	672	670	663	2.2%	-0.7%	0.7%
Reg	Sutherland	815	806	813	812	801	-0.1%	-0.7%	-0.4%
Reg	Windsor	854	846	847	846	800	-0.4%	-2.8%	-1.6%
Total	District 8-12	6994	7011	6898	6753	6593	-0.7%	-2.2%	-1.5%
Richmond School District (No. 38)									
Reg	Boyd	907	922	898	867	850	-0.5%	-2.7%	-1.6%
Reg	Burnett	1258	1275	1266	1266	1253	0.3%	-0.5%	-0.1%
Reg	Cambie	1211	1274	1231	1186	1155	0.9%	-3.1%	-1.1%
Reg	London	923	959	867	834	795	-2.8%	-4.2%	-3.5%
Reg	MacNeil	New School			125	274	No Data	119.2%	119.2%
Reg	McMath	1019	1017	1001	969	946	-0.9%	-2.8%	-1.8%
Reg	McNair	1046	1032	1023	943	907	-1.1%	-5.8%	-3.5%
Reg	McRoberts	482	492	525	554	521	4.4%	-0.2%	2.1%
Reg	Palmer	1015	998	993	870	854	-1.1%	-7.1%	-4.1%
Reg	Richmond	1164	1127	1159	1161	1179	-0.2%	0.9%	0.3%
Reg	Steveston	910	893	796	748	721	-6.4%	-4.8%	-5.6%
Total	District 8-12	10453	10535	10335	10154	9455	-0.6%	-4.3%	-2.4%
Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District (No. 42)									
Reg	Garibaldi	1131	1217	1303	1346	1322	7.3%	0.8%	4.0%
Reg	Maple Ridge	1516	1477	1448	1511	1623	-2.3%	5.9%	1.8%
Reg	Pitt Meadows	1178	1115	994	993	1020	-8.1%	1.3%	-3.4%
Reg	Thomas Haney	982	1006	1076	1205	1316	4.7%	10.6%	7.7%
Reg	Westview	1030	1068	1097	1140	1159	3.2%	2.8%	3.0%
Total	District 8-12	5937	6005	6011	6230	6465	0.6%	3.7%	2.2%

Sources: Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 44; Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 38; Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District (No. 42) Spreadsheet Database, 2004.

Table 2 shows the percentage of secondary school children living within a school's catchment area, attending their neighbourhood school, and enrolled in a regular program. A comparison of the district averages before and after choice legislation supports the claim that more students are attending public schools outside of their catchment areas. A greater number of parents and students are thus actively "choosing" schools beyond their home catchment area.

Table 2 School Catchment Population Retention								
Note: The numbers shown in the table reflect the percentage of students who attend their catchment school.								
School Name	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	3 Year Average (Before Legis.)	2 Year Average (After Legis.)	5 Year Average (Overall)
North Vancouver School District (No. 44)								
Argyle	82.0%	82.0%	85.0%	82.0%	78.0%	83.0%	80.0%	81.8%
Balmoral Jr. (8-10)	68.0%	69.0%	63.0%	53.0%	49.0%	66.7%	51.0%	60.4%
Carson Graham	62.0%	69.0%	57.0%	58.0%	53.0%	62.7%	55.5%	59.8%
Handsworth	95.0%	98.0%	98.0%	95.0%	93.0%	97.0%	94.0%	95.8%
Seycove	81.0%	82.0%	78.0%	78.0%	75.0%	80.3%	76.5%	78.8%
Sutherland	73.0%	70.0%	68.0%	67.0%	63.0%	70.3%	65.0%	68.2%
Windsor	80.0%	78.0%	75.0%	74.0%	68.0%	77.7%	71.0%	75.0%
Dist. Average 8-12	77.3%	78.3%	74.9%	72.4%	68.4%	76.8%	70.4%	74.3%
Richmond School District (No. 38)								
Boyd	86.0%	78.0%	56.0%	58.0%	55.0%	73.3%	56.5%	66.6%
Burnett	94.0%	95.0%	92.0%	88.0%	84.0%	93.7%	86.0%	90.6%
Cambie	81.0%	81.0%	77.0%	89.0%	86.0%	79.7%	87.5%	82.8%
London	82.0%	89.0%	83.0%	80.0%	74.0%	84.7%	77.0%	81.6%
MacNeil				10.0%	18.0%	0.0%	14.0%	5.6%
McMath	64.0%	78.0%	77.0%	84.0%	82.0%	73.0%	83.0%	77.0%
McNair	69.0%	71.0%	74.0%	78.0%	71.0%	71.3%	74.5%	72.6%
McRoberts	78.0%	76.0%	73.0%	76.0%	74.0%	75.7%	75.0%	75.4%
Palmer	76.0%	75.0%	68.0%	75.0%	72.0%	73.0%	73.5%	73.2%
Richmond	86.0%	86.0%	84.0%	83.0%	79.0%	85.3%	81.0%	83.6%
Steveston	74.0%	81.0%	77.0%	83.0%	79.0%	77.3%	81.0%	78.8%
Dist. Average 8-12	74.5%	77.8%	75.5%	73.1%	70.4%	75.9%	71.7%	74.3%
Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District (No. 42)								
Garibaldi	No Data	No Data	68.0%	65.0%	61.0%	Insuf. Data	63.0%	Insuf. Data
Maple Ridge	No Data	No Data	63.0%	68.0%	69.0%	Insuf. Data	68.5%	Insuf. Data
Pitt Meadows	No Data	No Data	87.0%	84.0%	80.0%	Insuf. Data	82.0%	Insuf. Data
Thomas Haney	No Data	No Data	34.0%	37.0%	39.0%	Insuf. Data	38.0%	Insuf. Data
Westview	No Data	No Data	38.0%	61.0%	60.0%	Insuf. Data	60.5%	Insuf. Data
Dist. Average 8-12	No Data	No Data	58.0%	63.0%	61.8%	Insuf. Data	62.4%	Insuf. Data

Sources: Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 44; Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 38; Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District (No. 42) Spreadsheet Database, 2004.

Although all three districts have historically developed under the neighbourhood school model, they have also offered students “choice,” such as French immersion. French immersion has seen a significant pattern of growth since the implementation of Bill 34. Table 3 illustrates the average change in French immersion enrollment in the three years before, and the two years after, the passage of choice legislation.

Table 3 French Immersion (8-12) Enrollments			
FI = French Immersion			
SD #44 = North Vancouver School District			
SD #38 = Richmond School District			
SD #42 = Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District			
Year	SD #44 8-12 FI	SD #38 8-12 FI	SD #42 8-12 FI
2000	336	518	429
2001	346	546	388
2002	357	576	375
2003	391	631	373
2004	443	661	391
3 Year Average (Before Legislation)	3.1%	5.4%	-6.5%
2 Year Average (After Legislation)	11.4%	7.2%	2.1%

Sources: Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 44; Demographic Dynamics 2004 for School District No. 38; Maple Ridge - Pitt Meadows School District (No. 42) Spreadsheet Database, 2004.

This study also examines the effects of Bill 34 on the independent schools that impact North Vancouver, Richmond, and Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows. Enrollment data provided by the Federation of Independent Schools Association and the Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese revealed that their enrollment numbers continue to increase. Independent schools currently enroll 9.9% of the provincial student body and the percentage is growing. The changes brought about by Bill 34, therefore, are not currently a source of concern for the independent schools.

This study led to some conclusions and recommendations for the public school districts involved in this study.

Conclusions:

- There have been very few new programs implemented as a result of Bill 34 in the three public school districts studied.
- Districts with declining enrollment overall have individual schools with substantial growth rates.

Recommendations:

- Districts should create opportunities for discussion within school communities regarding choice programs.
- Schools and districts need to address “flight” from schools.
- Public school districts need to consider the success of the independent schools.

References:

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