Programs of Choice: Successes and Challenges

By

Laura Smith Christian

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This research examined a policy developed by a school board and explored the successes and challenges of implementing a Sport Academy in a secondary school in Ontario. The Sport Academy’s Principal and teaching staff were interviewed about funding, admission criteria, staffing, equity and student engagement. When this program was established, there were concerns that it would appear to be elitist and recruit highly academic students and athletic overachievers. However, the model and programming available to students might actually provide more opportunities, course options and flexible programming to students. The issues raised by the school’s Principal and the Sport Academy teachers capture some of the political and practical problems that arise during the development of an innovative program.
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Dedication

For my father, Jerry Smith, who left us too soon.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Some school districts have developed and implemented Programs of Choice in some of its schools. These programs may have a focus on sports, languages, the arts, or other areas of interest, such as Social Justice or the Outbound environmental program. The list of programs continues to grow. Programs of Choice have been established in both elementary and secondary schools in North America.

This thesis focuses on the successes and challenges of creating and sustaining a Sport Academy. The study investigates the opinions of the school’s Principal and two Sport Academy teachers. Their impressions will be combined with a review of the literature, which surrounds the programs of choice debate and an analysis of the school board’s Programs of Choice Policy document. The intention of the researcher is to offer an examination of several factors, which should be considered during the implementation of a Program of Choice, such as student admission criteria, funding and equity issues.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

Alternative programming has been available to students in North America for decades. However, there has been a recent resurgence in offering choice to Canadian students in Alberta, Quebec and Ontario. In an era of declining enrollment, some school boards have looked at programs of choice as a strategy to alleviate the effect on staffing and funding which result from a shrinking student population. Limited research has been conducted at specific schools to gain insight into issues that require consideration when establishing a similar school or program. Similarly, there has been limited research into site-based, school-level practices that move past the choice debate and into the implementation stage, or a further stage of sustainability.
The research component of this thesis focuses on the responses of the school’s Principal, and two teachers who have been involved directly with the Sport Academy program. There are four main purposes to this study:

- to offer a summary of both sides of the choice debate, identifying key issues and synthesizing scholarly text on the topic of offering choice in schools,
- to examine the school district’s Programs of Choice Policy,
- to gain insight from educators who are applying choice programming at their school, and
- to analyze the successes and challenges of a Program of Choice in order to elicit ‘lessons learned’ for use in other schools

By combining an understanding of the choice debate with its practical application, I will identify factors for schools planning to launch their own choice programs, Summarizing both sides of the choice debate is an important step; showcasing the viewpoints of proponents and opponents of choice often captures the concerns that are brought up as the program is introduced. In addition, the literature serves to highlight a variety of issues and perspectives, and reveals what scholars have to say on the topic.

The second purpose of the study involves working with educators who are implementing choice programming: those who must meet the demands of the profession while simultaneously developing a choice program. Those interviewed will help to determine the factors that support the implementation of the Sport Academy. The analysis of the successes and challenges will illuminate the most significant triumphs and barriers.

The main research question is “What are the successes and challenges of offering programs of choice?”.
1.3 Educational Significance

Choice programming is a complex issue, requiring purposeful development and democratic dialogue from the initial phases of planning, throughout all stages of implementation. This study is relevant because it raises awareness of the major concerns that exist within choice programming. This thesis could serve as a guide to navigate discussion, to allow for depth and transparency during decision-making and planning for action. The philosophical foundation of program of choice theory will be presented to provide information to educational professionals, to assist with the development of unique programming should they wish to pursue it.

This study will provide information about components of programs of choice that can be troublesome, such as assessment and attendance. In general, there are several models that exist for subject or interest-specific programming. The self-paced, self-directed model for all students provides another layer of interest and relevance when it comes to innovation in education.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

I have been an elementary teacher for thirteen years and have taught in all three divisions, in schools, which serve both urban and rural populations. I hold Specialist certificates in Primary Education and Special Education. Two years of my teaching experience were spent in a system role, where I facilitated the implementation of revised mathematics and science curricula and supported teachers with various professional development initiatives. While in this position, I saw firsthand how difficult it can be to develop new programs and policies, and to align with provincial curriculum, district mandates and school-level goals. I also witnessed how school teams can function effectively when a collaborative, collegial and professional environment is established. The system role helped me to recognize just how remarkable teachers are as they embrace professional learning and offer their classrooms and their ideas for further nurturing.
I have worked for the past three years in an elementary school where a Program of Choice, the Sport Academy, has been developed. I currently teach English, History and Geography to one class of grade 7 students involved in the basketball-focused Sport Academy and two classes of students who are in the regular program. Due to the uniqueness of the school where I teach, I have gained some significant insights into sports-focused education. My interest in research and professional growth lead me to inquire about Canadian sources of sports-focused education in the hope that I could contribute to the educational research community and to my local school board and school.

My interest in this specific research project stems from my steadfast belief in public education. Perhaps I am an idealist, but I do believe public education is a strong role model of diversity, acceptance and equity and it will contribute to improved future prospects for its students and for the communities in which they live. I also believe we can be innovative as public school educators, and I seek to discover how other teachers have managed to balance innovative programming alongside provincial curriculum expectations and day-to-day workloads. This philosophical inquiry follows from an interest in understanding how alternative programs are developed, what these programs can offer all students, and what the implications are for schools and teachers.

One of the most compelling reasons why I have pursued this research did not occur to me until I was conducting the interviews. At each discussion, my previous experience as a competitive figure skater came up; I talked about how difficult it was to juggle the long days at school with the long nights at the rink. I spoke of how I remember eating dinner in the car as I was being driven to the rink and how agonizing it was to sit on a hard chair at school with a lower back injury from jumping and landing (well, falling actually). There was a lot of pressure
to perform flawlessly in both arenas, and I often felt exhausted and stressed. Seeing the flexible programming options and a strong commitment to maintaining a balance between sports and school made me wish I could have accessed it as a high school student and believe it could have contributed to improved performances as a skater and as a student. Health, wellness, injury reduction, nutrition and weight training could have enhanced my own athletic development.

Teaching at a school which operates a Program of Choice has provided me with an inside glimpse of issues that emerge for administrators, teachers, parents and students. It is a fascinating topic and to see it in action is even more intriguing. Certainly, growing pains emerge, as they do with any change in program or policy, however, the debate about the Sport Academy’s existence and if it is good for students is still happening. I wonder if there are aspects of the sports-focused programming that could benefit all students, and I question how we can challenge the perception that unique programming is elitist when it may, in fact, be a shining example of the differentiated instruction we have been promising students and their parents.

1.5 Plan of the thesis

It is my intention to offer a complete view of how one Canadian school board and secondary school developed sports-focused programming and this goal is reflected in the paper’s format. In Chapter 2, I consider the educational literature about schools and programs of choice. I have also used broad brushstrokes to compile relevant sources of research to showcase both sides of the choice debate that exist in the educational literature on school choice. In Chapter 3, I discuss the method used to answer the research questions.

In chapter 4, I discuss the findings based on interviews with the participants. They share their understanding of the school-based issues that arise, such as physical testing, assessment, attendance and finding the ‘right’ people who share the same level of passion and commitment
for the distinct teaching and learning which occurs in the sports program. Its benefits for students are discussed and a narrative from each of the educators who were interviewed is shared.

In Chapter 5, I examine the distinctive self-paced, self-directed model used at a local high school. This chapter also captures the beliefs of the principal and some of the staff who work there. The conclusion connects innovative programs (like the Sport Academy) to the overriding principles, which guide public education: democracy and difference.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

Many people have a superficial comprehension of the critical issues and implications, which are integral to understanding the program of choice debate. Discussions about programs of choice are inherently political. Some publicly-funded school boards have been responsive to parents’ demands for programs of choice, without full consideration of its possibilities and challenges. I will identify and summarize the critical issues represented by both sides of the choice debate, look specifically at Canadian research, and explore peripheral factors that influence decision-making with respect to alternative programs. The review of scholarly literature will lay the conceptual framework upon which the qualitative research for this thesis has been based.

The research in this review represents a compilation of mostly American and Canadian sources, and some international information. Interestingly, the critical issues emerge repeatedly, from the earliest research about choice to the most recent, and in a variety of political, economic, and systemic contexts. Most of the research is propelled by choice theory. Very few North American school districts have attempted to implement a wide array of choice policies until fairly recently. The choice spectrum makes comparisons difficult because it provides a range, from charter schools (dedicated in its entirety to a specific subject or belief) to schools that offer a choice program within a traditional public school. In each situation, it is difficult to determine the success of the choice movement because it is challenging to isolate and identify the impact of choice on student achievement with any level of empirical or anecdotal certainty.

2.1 Programs of Choice

The definitions of programs of choice differ in the literature. Corwin and Schneider (2005) suggest that choice “includes magnet schools, specialized alternative schools, vocational
schools, and mini-schools. It covers open enrolment plans…publicly funded vouchers (and) charter schools precariously straddling the private and public sectors” (p. 1). However, programs of choice can also include work-study programs, virtual learning, distance learning, home schooling, and schools based on language, culture, or faith, such as French Immersion. Inevitably, choice can be represented in many different ways and tends to be driven by a variety of political, social and school-based influences.

Identifying alternatives to traditional public education leads to an essential question: how do we define public education? If choice programs are a reaction to, and an attempt to reform public education, then what exactly are programs of choice responding to and what needs reforming? Gaskell (1991, 2001) explores these questions, and her work provides two of the strongest contributions in the programs of choice debate.

Gaskell (2001) probes the notion (or what she calls rhetoric) of common schooling in Canada. Her work seeks to reframe the identity of public schools and she encourages school board leaders and bureaucrats to recognize the limits and possibilities of difference. The Canadian lens she provides focuses on the “politics of difference” (Gaskell, 2001, p. 19) and the reaction of school boards to proposals for alternative schools. In view of the “public” component of Canadian schooling, we must consider what is valued within our school communities, what shapes our identities, and what inclusion really means.

While Gaskell (2001) mentions common schooling as “the crucible of citizenship, equal opportunity, and social cohesion” (p. 19), she makes the essential point that “difference in schooling is never static and is highly politically charged because it references ‘our’ assumptions about what children should learn in common, as citizens” (p. 20). Decision-makers need to
grapple with the kinds of difference, and how much difference should exist in common schools before venturing into the debate about choice.

Theorists connect democracy and citizenship with the notion of common schooling, although most do not provide Canadian case studies or school boards. Most thinkers relate democracy to issues of race, class and segregation. Gaskell (2001) asserts that “public education must provide space for different groups to have different kinds of schools, within limits set by provincial authorities” (p. 33). American policies that “once worked to reduce school segregation were simply reversed in the 1990s to allow segregation to return” (Corwin and Schneider, 2007, p. 179). With declining racial integration, data suggests economic and educational segregation soon follows (Corwin and Schneider, 2007).

The result is an urban-suburban divide, which affects educational levels, drop-out rates and our basic definition of citizenship. One does not need to look far to observe the polarizing, intense debates centering on race and segregation. On January 28, 2008, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted (by a margin of 11-9) to approve the creation of a black-focused public school, which opened in September, 2009. Several media outlets covered the hotly contested and highly controversial debate, including national television news stations, Maclean’s magazine, major Canadian newspapers and the Washington Post. One meeting, in November, 2007, was stopped after supporters of black-focused schools came to discuss the issue, realized it wasn’t on the agenda and became disruptive.

Critics were concerned about segregation, and believe students in public schools should be taught together, in a pluralistic manner. Ultimately, the TDSB initiated a three-year pilot project and 80 students were enrolled at Sheppard Public School, believing in the school’s potential for “addressing underachievement for all marginalized and vulnerable students” (2008).
In addition to offering an Afro-centered curriculum, the school aims to address a 40% school dropout rate among black youths. It will be interesting to observe the outcome of Afro-centered programming, and to see what its impact will be on the choice debate or alternative programming.

To achieve equity, our schools need to offer difference and pluralism, and some offer choice as the solution. Gaskell (2001) insightfully insists “whatever its comprehensive and liberal character, public space is not neutral, and does not give equal recognition to all cultural beliefs and practices” (p. 33). Even the most diverse schools operate with the holiday calendar of a dominant culture, so claims of neutrality are silenced by the actions of the status quo. Canadians continue to struggle over the connection between citizenship and schooling: can common schools meet the needs of diverse students in different ways? Is it possible for a market approach to work in education? Before we can consider these questions, it is necessary to summarize the components of each side of the choice debate.

The contentious programs of choice debate is serious. Magazine covers such as Toronto Life say parents are driven into a frenzy as they compete for spots in the ‘right’ school and will do anything to get there such as lie about their address, move, or go deeply into debt. Professionally Speaking highlights sports programs that are available to students across Ontario like a commercial. In bold red font, the text states “You don’t have to be rich or athletically gifted to take the course”, and “Hearing parents say that their kids really like the school, in some cases for the very first time, makes it all worthwhile” (Young, 2009, p. 41). Within each side’s argument, several issues emerge which require consideration, research and discussion. Most of the critical issues can be sorted into the categories of government policy, equity, inclusion and accessibility, student success, accountability, innovation and teachers’ responses (table 1).
<table>
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<th>Critical Issue</th>
<th>Proponents' Beliefs</th>
<th>Opponents’ Beliefs</th>
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| Government Policy      | -choice policies empower parents, students and teachers, so political interference in the political system is reduced                                                                                               | -market-based policies undermine the democratic control of schooling  
-it is impossible to be distinct: policies related to funding (which determines transportation) and curricula would still be government-driven                                                                 |
| Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility | -choice can offer options for families who feel they are trapped in failing schools  
-choice allows for ‘like-mindedness’ in education  
-choice can match a child’s needs and interests  
-children should be targeted for special or elite programs so enrichment can be provided                                                                 | -choice cannot benefit the poorest children, and a ‘have v. have not’ system may make them worse off  
-parents do not have the same access to transportation or information, thus limiting access  
-more-advantaged families may seize the most attractive new options and may be targeted  
-any sort of application process is unethical, undemocratic, and resembles privatization                                                                 |
| Student Success        | -increasing choice and competition will lead to improved outcomes  
-children may be more interested and engaged  
-interest and student enrolment in school will improve in an era of declining enrolment                                                                 | -how is success measured? Based on which evidence or indicators?  
-large gains in student outcomes can be achieved in traditional public schools  
-enrolment in school will only improve if students are ‘Board-shopping’ or the group of students are in jeopardy of leaving school; choice rarely appeals to the latter group of students                                                                 |
| Accountability         | -giving parents choices about the schools their children attend makes schools more accountable to those who rely on their services  
-test scores may improve                                                                                                                                  | -can the public purposes of schooling be achieved by a market-based education system?                                                                                                                                     |
| Innovation             | -the introduction of choice, competition, and a market-based system will spur innovation and improvement  
-parents can seek out schools that match their own values                                                                                               | -can choice really lead to the development of new practices?  
-traditional public schools can foster innovation and improvement                                                                                                                                                    |
Teachers’ Responses | -those interested in the choice program are inspired and enthusiastic  
- more PD funds will be spent on specialized development in the area of interest or expertise  
- teachers will have a greater impact on local decision-making and program direction  
- ’cream-skimming’ will start to happen; teachers with expertise or additional training may cluster in certain schools  
- targeting specific teachers for hire violates the central principle of a Collective Agreement  
- teachers in the traditional public system are capable of excellence; the other side makes assumptions about teachers’ behaviour

Table 1: Issues with Programs of Choice Adapted from Plank and Sykes, 2000.

Books reveal a similar level of intensity. *The School Choice Wars* (Merrifield, 2001) and *The School Choice Hoax* (Corwin and Schneider, 2007) bellow the powerful arguments raised by proponents and opponents of choice. The strong opinions provide a plethora of interesting ideas, but ultimately, they are supported by frail logic. Both sides offer evidence that is weak, riddled with assumptions, debatable or highly dependent on the circumstances under which it was obtained (Hill, 2002). Advocates of public education and proponents of choice have the same intention: to improve the quality of education. While this goal is appealing, its path is fettered with complex problems that lack easy solutions. For example, not every individual, family or group responds to a choice option in a similar, self-interested fashion. Research suggests that “low-income families of colour will passively withdraw from competition within the educational free market” (Fuller and Elmore, 1996, page 25). The depth of accountability promised by proponents of choice may not be appealing to some families, who may prefer a choice program solely for its curriculum content. So, within the choice framework, competing interests emerge, placing greater demands on an already vulnerable, heavily scrutinized option. Yet, choice advocates state that “when parents actively choose an approach to learning, that school and its students have increased opportunities for success” (Raham, 1998, page 2). But how does anyone know if a school is efficient and effective?
2.2 Identifying and choosing the best schools

In Ontario, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) standardized assessments may have influenced the increased demand for school choice and ‘better’ schools. Some parents still inquire about provincial ranking based on the school’s EQAO scores and it has become common practice to publicize a school’s scores in community newsletters and the school website. Yet philosophically, it is impossible to define the ‘best’ schools and instructional practices because they are so dependent on the structures, culture and mission of each individual school, not to mention policies, curricula and funding put into place by districts and Ministries of Education. It is “the right, freedom, and ability of parents to choose for their children the safest and best schools” (Brouillette, 1999, p. 3), but this requires a close examination of beliefs, attitudes and perceptions about what public education is and what it should do for children. Ironically, “choice theory assumes there is no universal ‘best’ school model…(giving) schools the freedom to offer programs within a framework of standards set by the government which provides funding” (Raham, 1998, p. 2).

Parents are not necessarily choosing the best school; they’re choosing the best fit for their child. The act of choosing in itself seems to have an impact on how parents perceive the caliber and effectiveness of the school. Parents and students may feel a greater sense of happiness with the public school system simply because they picked it.

The pressure to appear to be the best school has lead to choice being offered as a menu item; a way to placate parents who call for widespread educational reform. While some parents and administrators believe choice is an instrument for improving education, “there is strikingly little evidence that enhanced choice triggers the kind of educational improvement that its advocates predict” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 199). At best, choice “may produce useful
innovations in previously unresponsive systems” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 199). This could be said of any new initiative where a Board suddenly invests time and resources. Opponents would argue choice is hardly a quick or easy fix for a system that is perceived to be fractured.

With the word choice, one assumes the program or school is as liberal and open as the word implies. In reality, a student’s admission into a choice program is dependent on a significant number of visible and hidden factors. The obvious factors are politically motivated, such as the use of an admissions process or interview, and the family’s or student’s reputation as criteria for acceptance. In these situations, parents are not really choosing a program of choice at all. They are merely choosing to apply. Principals are ultimately choosing which students will be admitted and opponents of choice question the ethical and legal implications of this practice. Some school boards have had to resort to a lottery system for enrolment, lining up in “sub-zero temperatures for a coveted spot at [one school]” (Raham, 1998, p. 4), or camping for a week to register for a program. Parents whose work schedules do not allow the opportunity for waiting in line would not have the opportunity to choose. In this case, the process is choosing which children may benefit from the alternative program.

The hidden factors in choice theory are social, economical and cultural. These are theoretical issues which are inherently connected to equity. North American and international researchers question whether or not choice serves to secure social classes and children who already enjoy favourable resources, facilities and learning environments. Tse (2008) argues that Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools in Hong Kong “violate the principle of meritocracy in education…(and) results in unequal treatment at the starting point, in the process, and very likely (an) unequal outcome at the end” (p. 638). He asserts there is a solid connection between access to choice schools (specifically voucher programs/subsidies) and the family’s ability to pay. An
educational marketplace, Tse reasons, “works only for a limited stratum that is already advantaged in the present educational system” (p. 637).

A similar (and closer-to-home) example involves the recently implemented Children’s Fitness Tax Credit, which was established in 2007 as a way to support children’s participation in fitness activities and organized sports, particularly children whose families have limited budgets. Two years later, a survey conducted at the University of Alberta by Spence, Holt, Dutove and Carson (2010) revealed that “Canada’s fitness credit for kids benefits wealthy families the most” (p. 1). The authors also assert “children from low-income families are more likely to be physically inactive and engage in sedentary pursuits (and) the financial costs associated with organized physical activity (PA) programs (including sport and dance) are often a barrier to participation” (p. 1). While the intent of this survey was to see who was benefitting the most from changes in tax deductions, and to see if there was improvement in physical activity amongst Canadian children in all socio-economic levels, the survey strongly connects accessibility to family income. Families who could pay to register children in sports, and could afford to carry the burden of monthly activity and transportation costs, were those who benefitted the most from the tax credit.

Economics is also a consideration in districts where user-fees and transportation are required. If “most states now offer at least some choice within the traditional public school system through charter schools or public school choice laws” (Lips, 2008, p. 12), then how are students accessing the variety of programs that are offered? Choice options have increased in Canada, and so researchers should be investigating how children are getting to these programs and which transportation issues create the majority of barriers for students. Potentially, researchers could explore the segments of the student population who regularly access choice
programs to help determine if a more equitable mechanism can be devised to ensure all students have access.

Culturally, some students and families believe that choice is not really an option, which they can be a part of equity of access. There are “powerful ways in which the immediate cultural context of individual actors guides decision-making” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 25), which partially explains why there is a varied reaction to school choice. Families may “choose not to participate in this competition as they resist the dominant culture it symbolizes or they perceive their chances of winning to be slim…others participate eagerly, seeking upward mobility through access to higher-status schools” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 25). Researchers must pay close attention, and give careful consideration to the hidden cultural perceptions in order to empower all parents and students in an equitable way.

Another factor is declining enrolment. Choice may allow principals to engage in the inequitable practice of “cream skimming” (Tse, 2008, p. 641), to raise scores and enrolment. Choice schools exist so they could “exercise greater power of screening prospectus students” (Tse, 2008, p. 641). As a result, schools within the geographical catchment area would be left to serve disadvantaged students disproportionately. So, choice schools would be “‘admitting’ good students rather than ‘producing’ good students” (Tse, 2008, p. 642). ‘Cream skimming’ may also marginalize students who feel they don’t fit in, aren’t being successful, and simply can’t compete with the highly developed talents and skills of their hand-picked peers. In addition, gathering a homogeneous group of highly successful students skews the average, and has the potential to suggest average students are behaviourally or academically challenged in comparison.

Similarly, the cream-skimming of teachers may take place simultaneously, which provokes competing interests to emerge. Choice schools may lure teachers of specialized
curriculum areas or interests, thereby depleting the development of board-wide expertise that would have an impact on a greater number of teachers and students. The issue of teacher selection needs to be considered within the context of the collective agreement, which serves the entire district of teachers. Perceptions of favouritism or ‘bumping’ of seniority may cause dissention towards the choice program. Teachers who found a program of choice are often “concerned that their vision has not been realized because of the demands of the public system (whereas other teachers describe choice) as a ‘private’ school within a public system” (Gaskell, 1999, p. 9). Teachers in the choice program may work different hours, have different expectations placed upon them, or their teaching assignments may resemble those which exist in the private sector.

This situation can also create a dichotomy within the profession between ‘core’ teachers and those who teach electives courses (which are often the raison d’être in choice schools). With government agencies focusing on literacy and numeracy “because their reputations depend on tested student performance on reading and mathematics” (Hill, 2008, p. 244), there is often a great divide in workload and funding. In a recent study, Roza analyzed district and school spending patterns in the United States, looking at staffing, salaries, benefits and central office support to determine actual staffing costs per course and per pupil (Hill, 2008). The findings are significant: district-run schools spend much less per pupil on core classes. In some cases, the funding was half as much as electives courses, and “this is in part because of larger class sizes in core subjects and the fact that higher paid senior teachers can avoid work-intensive core subjects” (Hill, 2008, p. 244). Roza claims that “school districts’ uses of money are seldom connected to their announced school improvement strategies” (Hill, 2008, p. 245), which is a provocative point.
Choice schools with an arts or a sports emphasis may be staffed in an unbalanced and unfair way. Core teachers would be left to face the brunt of the workload (such as data collection, assessment, reporting, curriculum integration, planning, and student achievement analysis) and the stress of obtaining the district’s goals of improved literacy and numeracy scores. Teachers in the choice program (who usually teach one or two subjects) may receive the accolades for increasing student happiness and school enrolment, whereas the core teachers would face the blame if standardized test scores show minimal or no gains.

2.3 Reactions from Teachers and Federations

Proponents of choice schooling have great difficulty swaying the opinions of public education advocates such as local, provincial and federal Teachers’ Federations. Researchers are particularly critical of the responses from teachers’ unions (Raham, 1998). She disparages the $1.6 million dollars spent by the Canadian Teachers’ Federation on media ads, brochures and forums, which defend its current model of public education (p. 6). She disapproves of the position taken by teacher federations, which are “opposed to evaluating schools based on results of standardized testing” (p. 19). Raham also prefers “new models of (teacher) evaluation and personnel practices which depart from traditional collective agreements” (p. 19), so that professional development and instructional decision-making would be linked intrinsically with the mission of the school rather than the goals of an individual teacher.

In a position paper published in 2000, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) argues vouchers and charter schools are nothing more than an attempt to provide public money to operate private schools. ETFO (2000) criticizes the application of a market approach in public education, and declares a very strong position in a position paper:

ETFO believes that the highest quality of education for all citizens, irrespective of their needs and/or abilities, should be enshrined as a basic human right in the Canadian
Constitution. ETFO further believes that the way to guarantee this right is through a well-funded, high quality public education system. ETFO is opposed to vouchers, charter schools, and providing public money for the operation of private schools. All of these approaches to education undermine the democratic principles upon which public schools are founded. (p. 13)

What’s missing in the ETFO position is its stance regarding choice programming that occurs alongside and within regular programming. Its own members have developed programs organically, out of interest or expertise. Whether it’s a Sport Academy, robotics program or arts-focused credit package, in no way do these programs resemble vouchers, charters or private schools. Can choice programming be an option for students, without subscribing to the belief this somehow corrupts public education? With increasing diversity in its population and interests, public schools need to remain current and relevant.

ETFO’s goal to support a strong publicly funded education system is understood, but several questions remain about the kinds of common experiences constitute the democratic principles of education that ETFO is defending. Could it be that offering choice programming is, in fact, a way of approaching democracy?

While the arguments for and against choice will always be a magnet for debate, we have reached a point where questions about democracy, funding, staffing, implementation and frequent monitoring need to be voraciously discussed. When it comes to choice programs, decisions are intensely political, the process in and of itself requires investments of time and energy, and democratic discussions about fairness and equity need to be considered before alternatives can be explored. Gaskell (2001) reminds us about inclusion and the nature of a common school are complex issues that also require scrutiny.

Embarking on choice is not easy. The practical question for all stakeholders is where the boundary between parental discretion and the public (or parental) interest should be drawn.
Choice may be a popular direction for a particular school, but it may not necessarily be the best direction. If choice is to be attempted, researchers and policy-makers must focus on “what kind of choices public policy should promote, within what constraints, and for what purposes” (Fuller & Elmore, 1996, p. 199) and carefully examine the risks of choice and the promises that are given to parents.

The education of students in the ‘regular’ stream must not be forgotten. With choice, Board administrators may be concentrating on improved consumer satisfaction, and accountability to those who have chosen their schools. Research must explore perceptions about public education, by surveying parents and students in choice programs and mainstream education to examine their reactions to questions about equity, access, accountability, innovation, and what choice should offer students. The investigation of the success of choice programs needs to take place as close to the school level as possible, and with input from all stakeholders, including parents and students not involved in the program. Inevitably, we need to ask if the proposed benefits of the choice program can be offered in the mainstream system, to all students. We must remember the overall improvement in opportunity and performance for all students is the responsibility of every educator and policy-maker.
Chapter 3 Method

3.1 Context and Setting

Although many Programs of Choice have been introduced in Canada, there has been little research conducted to determine how they have been received and perceived by students, parents and educators. This research was developed to gain some understanding about how to establish a Program of Choice, what implementation issues exist, and how a model like the one used at one program of choice has been developed.

Richmond Secondary School is located in an urban school district in Ontario, Canada. According to its website, 1217 students were enrolled in the 2009-2010 school year; 610 male students and 607 female students. The primary language spoken at home is English, followed by Arabic. Within the student population, two students are identified as being born outside of Canada, although language and place of birth information is missing for some students. Enrollment at Richmond S.S. is available to all students within the school district, but transportation is not provided as it would be in a typical catchment area.

There is a misconception that Richmond S.S. is only for gifted students, which is an issue that should be clarified. The school district does offer transportation to the school for students who are identified as gifted, should they wish to pursue the Gifted and Enhanced Program. Most required courses are offered as a special class for gifted students, and they can accelerate the pace of their learning or slow down a specialty or area of interest as they see fit. The Gifted and Enhanced classes are also available to students in the self-paced program if space permits, and after consultation with the school’s Principal or Department Head.
Like many composite high schools, Richmond S.S. has an array of strengths and subject-specialties. It is known by reputation as having a strong Arts program, especially Music. It also has one of the largest Language Departments within the Board, and still offers German and Latin to students.

There are two unique and innovative aspects to the programming offerings at Richmond S.S.: the self-paced program, and its two Programs of Choice. The school district has awarded the school with two Profiling Excellence Awards, recognizing the school’s delivery model of self-paced programming, and the Sport Academy. The self-paced, self-directed program is “best-suited to students whose families support the development of goal setting, effective time management and independent learning skills”. The school operates entirely on a self-pacing, self-directed program, which began in 1990. The program description can be found on the school’s website:

We continue to our work and commitment to ensuring that we remain true to the philosophy of our self-paced, self-directed mode of delivery. In 2006-2007, [The school] piloted the addition of several flex days to provide greater opportunities for students to self direct their learning, developed Conference sites which provide course information and resources for students, and provided training and professional development on the use of such technology as SmartBoards and podcasting to enhance the delivery and monitoring of our program. (n.p.)

All Richmond students participate in the self-paced program, and it is a flagship school in the district for providing this type of learning model. The self-pacing involves students working through learning guides, accessing teacher support, and then taking final exams when the students feel they are ready. This model allows for flexibility to meet students’ individual needs, learning styles and speed variances when it comes to task completion. For example, self-pacing offers an accelerated completion of courses and ‘carry over’ is also available for students who require time beyond one semester to finish a course. Students have daily advisor time and receive
monthly reports from their advisor to show parents and to monitor progress. The school also offers Credit Recovery courses for grade 9 and 10 students, along with a two-week Summer Carry-Forward Program in July so students can complete, begin or move forward in a self-paced course.

Richmond S.S. also operates two different Programs of Choice: Social Justice and Sport Academy. Intended for students concerned with democracy and community, the Social Justice Program is described on the school district website as a “four-credit package (which) gives students who are interested in current events and social issues a unique opportunity to acquire skills and experience that will make them more effective participants in the community” (n.p.). The Sport Academy is an opportunity for students to receive “strong instructional leadership from within the Department of Health and Physical Education at [the school] and support from personal trainers at [the local] University” (n.p.). Very recently, a user fee has been attached to the Sport Academy program, to help alleviate the additional costs of transportation to and from the University, and the training or instruction that occurs there.

3.2 Procedures

The University of Toronto’s Research Ethics Board and the school board approved my research proposal and I met with Richmond’s principal to discuss the research project. He encouraged his staff involved in the Social Justice and Sport Academy Programs of Choice to participate and I sent my flyer to him and the teachers. Those with questions, or an interest in participating in the study, emailed their responses to me. The dates, times and locations for the interviews were mutually agreed upon. Two teachers from the Sport Academy responded and agreed to participate in the interview. The principal agreed to meet for an interview. It was
promised that teachers would be given self-selected pseudonyms in all data and publications, to conceal their names.

This study uses a mixed methods approach. Primarily, qualitative research data is used; derived from interviews with school administration and teaching staff. Each of those interviewed has also contributed a narrative about a student who is a strong example of how the Sport Academy has positively or negatively impacted his or her life. As well, a document analysis of the school districts Programs of Choice Policy will show how the school board’s senior administration plans for the proposals and pilots related to Programs of Choice. Some quantitative student population data will be looked at for consideration of potential equity issues, such as speaking English.

The research site consistently demonstrated a warm, inviting place for students, staff and the researcher. Each time I visited, students milled about near entranceways, on paths to the school, long after the dismissal bell had gone. Students were often playing an instrument, or talking excitedly about their futures, wondering aloud what it would take to become a veterinarian or discussing shared interests. Office staff displayed similar warmth, and it was amusing to watch a Vice Principal greet each teacher with great enthusiasm, asking how his or her day was and inquiring about the teacher’s plans for the evening. The Principal never made me feel as though I was taking too much of his time and shared the same warmth and enthusiasm that is reflected in the school environment. Teachers who were interviewed graciously offered their spaces to me and showed significant thought and reflection when discussing the interview questions.

Even though the interview questions were the same for the Principal and the teachers, their responses reflected the roles they are in and the length of time each had been involved in
the Sport Academy. It was terrific to get a spectrum of experience for each answer, and the research was definitely enhanced by the Principal’s willingness to discuss some of the issues that can emerge, from an administrator’s perspective.

The interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed to elicit information about the successes and challenges of implementing a Sport Academy program. This study also includes an analysis of school district website information and its policies about Programs of Choice, specifically, the Sport Academy.

3.3 Limitations

This study was limited to one secondary school and one school board, chosen because of its geographical and programming proximities to the elementary school where I teach full-time. Since participation in the interview process was voluntary, not every teacher involved in the Sport Academy was interviewed. There is a small number of school staff that is designated to be Sport Academy teachers, so interviewing two from a small sample is adequate.

The research was conducted by one researcher, who has taught in various roles for thirteen years. Given the high level of interest by my colleagues concerning the development of Programs of Choice, and the politics behind some of the decisions made during its implementation, it became evident to me that research from the field could provide some insight about the possibilities and limitations of choice.
Chapter 4 Policy on Programs of Choice

4.1 The History

To learn about Programs of Choice, the school district sent two Principals to Edmonton to observe how the public school board developed its alternative programming. One of the Principals later became a Superintendent of Education, and Programs of Choice became one of his current responsibilities. Discussions began in 2002 about a potential Board-wide plan to develop a policy for interest-based programs. In June 2003, the original Programs of Choice Policy was approved by Executive Council. The policy was reviewed and approved in April 2009 and the projected review date is April 23, 2012. The Programs of Choice Policy (number 7.17), which was approved in April, 2009, was examined (Appendix A).

The board’s student achievement mission is reflected in the Policy Statement:

It is the policy of the [District School Board] to support innovative programs within its schools and enhance student achievement by responding to stakeholder needs through the adoption of approved Programs of Choice. (n.p)

The definition seeks to define interest-based, flexible programming:

Programs of Choice is used to define non-Ministry mandated, unique, innovative learning programs in focused areas, designed to engage students who have differing educational interests. The programs have the capacity to develop a broad range of skills and further enhance character development, academic achievement, and leadership development and may include language, environmental studies, the arts and fitness and wellness. These programs compliment subjects/courses consistent with the Ontario Curriculum however, offer specialized learning opportunities that develop skills with greater depth and intensity. Students may enter a Program of Choice at different elementary and secondary grade levels based on program availability and admission criteria. Secondary programs of choice may contribute to a Ministry approved Specialist High Skills Major when a career-focused pathway offering opportunities in apprenticeship, college, university and workplace exists.

It is difficult to capture the possibilities and limitations of choice programming within a policy definition. This definition provides satisfactory clarity about the Board’s intentions for innovative learning programs. The Ontario Ministry of Education does not mandate these
programs, as they are an extension of the Ontario Curriculum because they offer greater depth and intensity for student learning opportunities. Of the four Guiding Principles described by the school district for programs, the two that are most relevant to this research study are:

- Adhere to the highest standards of programming excellence expected by the Board, the community, the associated partners and the parents and students in the program, and
- Endeavour to provide accessibility for all students

Both of these guiding principles are problematic. Programming excellence is an ambiguous term. The definition directly states these programs are a complement to, and are a scope which is of greater depth and intensity of the Ontario curricula, making the monitoring of the programming excellence difficult. If a school board tightens its controls on schools that offer choice programs, it could contradict the beliefs of the school’s principal. If the principal believes “these programs work because of the great people…charismatic, passionate, professionals” and formal curriculum takes more of a secondary role, then the policy could be revised to support the decisions that are made at the school level. While the curriculum is important, these programs are dependent on the flexibility, innovation and enthusiasm of the teachers and the principal suggests teachers in these programs have something that “makes them special, that makes them engaging to kids”.

Tightening school board controls on schools that offer choice programs could contradict what the school’s principal believes to be important for the program to survive and flourish. Among teachers and administrators, there is ongoing debate and discussion about the content of curriculum expectations, and the evaluation of them. So it becomes increasingly difficult for teachers who are developing distinct programs. Across the province, highly experienced and new teachers can struggle with the implementation of a revised curriculum document including resource documents, rubrics and report card comments, even with coaching or administrative
support. Provincially, thousands of teachers are implementing the same big ideas, including overall and specific expectations and concept continua, which naturally promotes professional dialogue and mentoring. The Teacher Performance Appraisal Process in the school district is clear that administrators do the monitoring of teachers (and thus, program monitoring).

At Richmond S.S., teachers developed “terms and conditions of participation” for the students and one of the teachers interviewed said this sparked from the great difficulty teachers were having assessing students in grade 9. The teacher said, “in the elementary program, (they) got really high marks” because the students demonstrated an athletic ability that exceeded grade level expectations or, in the very least, demonstrated a high degree of success with the grade level curriculum. At the school, the teachers participated in discussions about the curricula, and decided to “try to create some equality (with their curriculum) for great athletes”.

The guiding principle which states Programs of Choice must “endeavour to provide accessibility for all students” requires some explanation. The Board does not place a high expectation upon itself to provide accessibility for all students. For example, the Board does not provide transportation, informational brochures are not translated into a variety of languages, and students who are identified (other than gifted) typically do not apply to be a part of these programs. Repeatedly, those interviewed spoke of the “commitment of (the family’s) resources and time” or the student’s ability to be organized and catch up because “the whole point of our program is to allow for missing time” (due to training and tournaments). If accessibility for all interested students is a priority for the board, then future changes to the funding model and transportation methods can empower this guiding principle to become a reality.

There are five policy objectives and three of them are the most relevant to this research study:
- Attracting, retaining and engaging students with differing educational interests,
- Attracting, retaining and engaging staff with specialized knowledge, skills and training, and
- Increasing parent involvement and satisfaction.

Concerns about declining enrolment and the subsequent detrimental impact on funding and staffing appear to be a key motivation for the Board when it was decided to implement Programs of Choice. Retaining students in the public system is desirable; attracting students from other systems (separate, private and homeschooled) assist public school boards reach enrolment targets. It is important for the board to support teachers who are developing Programs of Choice with additional professional development programs. Attracting staff to these programs could undermine relationships that have been developed by the teachers and the community where they teach if the board is seeking to replace teachers with those from a different board or outside the profession. As well, the board may accept teachers with fewer teaching qualifications and this has the potential to weaken respect for traditional professional development.

4.2 Parent Involvement

Programs of Choice have the potential to increase parent involvement. Since parents transport their children to and from school, there is a heightened awareness of upcoming events and communication with the school’s administration and teaching staff. Parents are at the school more frequently. With Sport Academy, for instance, the increased number of games and events encourage ongoing contact with the school and teachers have more opportunities to update parents about their child’s progress or to say a quick hello. On the opposite side of the spectrum, parents who interpret their role to be that of an overseer, or pseudo-administrator, can have a detrimental impact on the program’s implementation and the relationship with their child’s teacher. The school administrators need to safeguard these programs from any potentially negative situations that may develop with inappropriate parent involvement, such as intrusive
questioning, entitlement, conflicts of interest, and privacy issues of students and teachers, which may arise. In short, increased parent involvement may not always be a good thing for a school program.

Another philosophical issue raised in this policy is the role parents have when requests are made for specialized programs. The policy states that the school board can respond to parental requests for programs in specialized areas that meet the unique needs of students across the district.

The policy could rely on educational pedagogy about student grouping and the proposed benefit to students rather than a market approach used in business. One teacher points out, “being of their own ilk, you have no one shutting down the volleyball game, saying they don’t want to play. The Sport Academy is an opportunity for kids who are gifted in those areas to develop in a comfortable setting”. In the policy, there is an emphasis on stakeholders and requests of parents, instead of a more concentrated focus on teaching and learning. This could be interpreted to mean parents can order a program of choice from a menu. This intended outcome encourages one to think ‘where would it end?’ and ‘would animosity develop within a group of parents if their proposed choice program is not adopted?’ Or, competing interests could emerge between various programs of choice, doing battle over the same students. Additionally, if something worth learning is absent from the Ontario Curriculum, then perhaps the intended audience should be the Ministry of Education.

The remainder of the Programs of Choice Policy includes action items which are required, key measures of success, reporting requirements, and references to related policies or policy directives. Action items involve components of initial decision-making, such as who decides on whether or not to support a proposal for a new Program of Choice, implementation
planning, pilot year requirements and resourcing (including financial considerations and staffing).

4.3 Starting a Program of Choice

The path to starting a Program of Choice is clearly laid out in the policy. Any program can be “initiated by a community group or school staff in the [school district]”. If it comes from school staff, the school’s administration must agree with the new program. The process involves completing an application proposal form, getting the support of the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice (who consults with another Superintendent of Education and administration), completing an implementation plan, and doing a presentation to the Proposal Review Committee. If the proposal successfully winds its way through all of these steps, the proposed Program of Choice is referred to Executive Council for final approval. If approved, the program can begin its pilot year and those requirements are also included in the policy. An external review process occurs at the end of the second year of the Program of Choice and the report is presented to Executive Council.

The composition of the Programs of Choice Proposal Review Committee will be composed of the following members:

1 Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice       1 Elementary Administrator
1 Trustee of the Board                                  1 Secondary Administrator
1 Parent Involvement Committee Member                  1 non-parent ratepayer
1 Elementary Teacher                                    1 Elementary Student Leader
1 Secondary Teacher                                    1 Secondary Student Leader

Teachers, parents and students have equal representation on this committee, even though it is teachers who are making these programs happen in schools. As one teacher said, “I don’t know who (the school board) talked to” and it would serve to benefit the implementation of Programs
of Choice if teachers who work in them serve on this committee; ideally, at least four teachers (two elementary, two secondary). Similarly, if the administrators were designated as Programs of Choice administrators that would be an asset to the committee’s discussion and hopefully shed some light on issues Principals face as they implement these types of programs.

Maybe a tiered approach would work effectively, so an increased amount of school-level input could be given to the school board and the entire school community would benefit from participating in the process. Even though the board’s plan for establishing a Program of Choice is clear, the origins of the Sport Academy are not clear:

It is funny because they did not go to the District Athletic Council to talk about allowing Programs of Choice, they did not talk to the phys. ed. heads, they did not talk to coaches, they just kind of came in…but they did not promote this big…they just said it is a good idea. It is a way to keep students, and we are in a board that is in decline and we have lots of kids in the city—there is no reason why we cannot keep them, because we have outstanding educators and lots of outstanding coaches. We should not be losing kids to another board simply because they have a nicer looking school. (teacher)
Chapter 5  A Self-Directed Model and its Programs of Choice

A self-paced, self-directed model began at Richmond in 1990, although it started solely as a self-paced program. One of the educators interviewed thinks of it this way: “How I would frame it? We have mastered the self-pacing part of it; we are still in the process of mastering the self-directed part of it, and that is the part that is really exciting about the school”. Within the self-paced, self-directed model reside the two very different Programs of Choice: the Sport Academy, which started in 2007 and the Social Justice program, which began in September 2009.

The first Sport Academy class will be entering grade 12 in the 2010-2011 school year and was developed as a result of its implementation at the elementary level. Students who were participating in the program during their Middle School years wished to continue with the training and athletic programming once they moved on to high school.

The Social Justice program is not self-paced, and functions as a traditional class would, except the focus is on issues of social justice, community connections and democracy. It is self-directed but the scheduling is very different in comparison to other students who are at the school. There is only one Social Justice Program on the timetable and there is no carry over option. During the interviews, the program was explained this way:

students from day one are planning what social issue they are going to address and work on that throughout the semester. It is a four-credit package; it is the same group of kids with one teacher for three periods, the other teacher for the fourth period. It is all about being self-directed, not pacing, because if they do not finish by the end of the semester, there is no other class for them to go to.

This model can cause challenges for students who are struggling, because it has the potential to have an adverse affect on four credits. The principal advocates for serious contemplation and decision-making beforehand, saying “it is really a big decision for kids to go
into that program”, because the self-pacing feature that is made available to students in other courses is not a part of the Social Justice program. Students who require extra time for assignments or ‘carry over’ at the end of a semester are encouraged to remain in the self-paced classes.

Teachers mention the Sport Academy was developed to help attract students who contemplate leaving the school board for a local, newly-constructed Separate School in the neighbourhood. As one teacher says, “we were in conflict with the Catholic board” and creating the Sport Academy “was an opportunity to try what was taking place in Alberta and specifically, Quebec, for high potential and high level athletes with an opportunity to train and to pursue academic excellence as well”. In order to compete with other boards, and to keep students in the Sport Academy stream that began in the elementary panel, Richmond S.S. decided to offer different programming options. Those teachers who created the Sport Academy also recognized an opportunity to develop a program, which is tailored to the busy training schedules of high-level student athletes. Richmond, with its self-paced, self-directed model, offered the flexibility that most secondary schools do not. As one teacher said, “I do not know if the Sport Academy would work as well at a regular high school, because you lose a lot of time when you are travelling with your team, you are training, you have to take your work with you…”

The model includes ‘stacked’ programming to offer as many different course options to students as possible. At first, it was a challenge for school administration to be able to offer those options, due to staffing and timetabling hurdles. Students have the option of choosing applied or academic level courses, just like any other high school student would. One Sport Academy student may require applied level math and academic level English, whereas another student may need academic level math and applied level English. Predicting class sizes and the subsequent
staffing were problematic, but now that the program is in its fourth year, it is an issue that has been resolved. The principal is thankful that “no student has had to leave Sport Academy for that academic reason”. The layering of the self-paced, self-directed learning model with the stacked programming and Programs of Choice is inventive and there is a sense the staff does what it can to offer flexible, innovative programs to meet the needs of all students.

5.1 Funding, Support and Site Requirements

The school board has a budget specifically for the Sport Academy. Each school, which operates a Program of Choice, does not have an operating budget, but “there is a contract with [the university] that is paid for by Programs of Choice budget”. The Principal explains the funding in this way:

While we do not have a direct [budget line] …there is five thousand dollars for the gym teachers to run their program, there is funding through Programs of Choice. Transportation is the biggest issue. We are going to a user fee largely to cover the transportation costs for the program. As always, we have to find a way to make sure that’s not a barrier to students taking the Program and those would be in-school funds to ensure we have available to cover students that have that socioeconomic disadvantage.

Richmond staff is very concerned with the fact that financial issues may be a barrier for some students. One said, “I can think of 3, maybe 4 students where money was an issue. When we interviewed them, that was one of the questions the parents asked and we have to be mindful of that when user fees are being requested”. Similarly, with a new Sport Academy opening at another elementary school, where the socioeconomic status is generally lower, the user fee issue may continue to be a problem if those students decide to continue their Sport Academy programming at Richmond once they reach grade 9.

Each of the educators interviewed discussed funding as an issue throughout all phases of implementation and the Principal highlighted the need for sustainability:
Funding is a big issue, which is a big challenge for us and for the Board, is with Programs of Choice in general, they have to be mindful that there is sustainability. As a Board, we give seed money to these programs to start them, but we have to ensure that there’s long-term sustainability.

The need for sustainability justifies the request for a user fee, and the staff and students also participate in some fundraising events to help cover additional costs. The user fee that has been recently added is estimated to be between $150.00 and $300.00 per student. Since Sport Academy students are bused to the University for training once a week, and this is an expensive and ongoing cost of the program, the cost was passed on to the students. The teachers feel the connection to the university is important, and believe the Richmond Sport Academy program is bridging a gap between secondary schools and university’s long-term athlete development model, which has been developed for every sport.

Even though Sport Academy schools could use any service provider if they wish to pursue outside training, the teachers believe the university is a key component of the program’s success. One teacher said “having contact with trainers of their stature, knowledge, expertise and background…the kids, they do not understand how lucky they are to have those people, who are so highly trained and everything else, as part of their life right now”. Students even have access to Olympians, who shared his experience with the students, and discussed strategies for focusing during their Olympic performances. The user fee will help students’ access to internationally renowned athletes, which is difficult to provide at the school level.

The user fee helps with transportation costs, but the school site also has some significant costs for specialized programs. At Richmond, renovation work was done in Studio B, a beautiful fitness room specifically designed with personal and group training in mind. It has a rubberized floor, wall-sized mirror, fitness equipment such as exercise balls, a few new tables and a
computer. In Richmond’s case, Studio B was realized by converting unused space in the basement into a custom fitness room. The construction was funded by the school district’s Programs of Choice envelope. It was important for the school district to fund this construction, because, as one teacher said:

To create training space, like if you want to have elite level, high-level athletes training, and high potential athletes training, then you have to build a facility where they can train. The general, high school gymnasium slash weight room does not work, you know, to the best of their ability…if they want to have programs of choice they need to provide significant funding to provide the type of strength training facility that athletes want to have, with the track or the right floor…a tile floor?

Facilities need to be renovated and maintained in order to enhance the opportunities of students involved in the Sport Academy. Tile floors present concerns about the shock absorption in ankles and knees; wooden and rubberized flooring is preferable, albeit more expensive. An added bonus is its use by all students in the school for regular gym classes and extracurricular or intramural sports activities. Opportunities for additional income also present themselves when wood floors are installed: basketball teams and leagues contribute rental income which could be used to help pay for the flooring and its maintenance.

5.2 The People

The interviewees frequently suggested that the people in the program made the difference. One teacher said:

I have to highlight…it is about the people. Education is a people business. We can frame it however we want, we can have new ideas, we can redo old ideas…it’s about teachers, in the end. It’s about the teacher-student relationship. You’ve got to have the right people running these programs and coordinating these programs and expanding these programs. If you don’t have that, the programs will die. It doesn’t matter how many kids are interested in it; and that’s not just Sport Academy, if you don’t have the right Mandarin teacher, then you’re not going to get enough kids. The program’s not going to thrive, and so it’s about people. It really is and at Richmond’s Sport Academy program we have the right people.
When discussing funding issues, all of those interviewed stated that having the right people, with the right training or professional development in these positions, was important for the success of the program. The principal captured this belief quite succinctly: “a lot of these programs are driven by the great people that are teaching these programs. Without those charismatic, passionate professionals, the programs do not go”.

Early days of the Sport Academy were similar to those of the Outbound Program, with teachers proposing their programs to administrators, parents and students. All teachers agreed that a top-down model would not work, and made the point that interest in the school, by passionate people, was a necessary first step. Those interviewed felt the Sport Academy’s success is completely dependent on the teachers who are making it successful because of their interest in its development and their ability to understand the unique demands, which are placed on athletes. All of the teachers in Richmond’s Sport Academy reached a high level of athleticism within their chosen discipline, and all have been involved with multiple levels of coaching. The staff is comprised of “a varsity soccer player, a hall of fame basketball player, a varsity football player and we have a third degree black belt”. Three of the four main Sport Academy teachers are certified as personal trainers. Some funding has been made available to the staff to obtain or update their personal training certification.

Teacher qualifications can become an issue when finding teachers for the Sport Academy. One of the teachers interviewed said, “my biggest problem is that parents know you are a phys. ed. teacher, and that you are not a trainer. [They wonder] What do you know?” If parents are demanding more than ‘just a gym teacher’ then the administrators need to determine what to do next. There could be potential staffing conflicts when considering the teachers’ Union
and the existing Collective Agreement. The principal makes a strong case to consider when staffing a specialized program:

You cannot take just any phys. ed. teacher and put them in a Sport Academy. You cannot take just any qualified history or Social Science teacher and put them in- and say hey, surprise! You are teaching the Social Justice program. There has to be the want, the professional desire to be in that situation and then that additional expertise. It is beyond the teacher’s certificate. It is beyond being just a phys. ed. teacher and I do not mean that in any way negatively towards regular phys. ed. teachers, but to make these programs go, there has to be that personal and professional passion of the educator and then sometimes some additional qualifications that they have that make them special and make them engaging for the kids.

Union issues could arise when credentials beyond the regular scope of education and training for teachers are taken into consideration during hiring. What has become clear over the course of this research project is that Richmond’s Sport Academy program is not a regular physical education program. Nor is it a physical education program with extra benefits, such as athletic training. Coupling unique programming with teachers who can facilitate it is essential, and having teachers who are interested in, and have experience with, specialized athletic training is important for the success of Sport Academy. While specialization in athletics may be a bit of a grey area when compared to other subject-specific qualifications, it is reasonable for principals to take a teacher’s coaching, training, and athletic experiences into consideration during the hiring process for Sport Academy.

It is raised in the educational literature that hiring teachers who share the philosophical beliefs in the program’s mission statement is difficult and has a negative impact on the entire system if the ‘cream-skimming’ of teachers takes place. Using a fine arts school as an example, Gaskell (1999) shares the concern of a district teachers’ association: “the school will draw the best fine arts teachers from other schools, leaving them impoverished” (p. 19). Alternately, proponents of choice argue teachers have a greater impact on local decision-making and program
direction (Plank and Sykes, 2000), thus empowering teachers to make decisions based on what the needs are of the students in their classes.

5.3 Admission Criteria

Teachers are often asked what it takes for a student to access a Program of Choice. There are specific admission criteria for each Program of Choice and waiting lists exist each year. There are disappointed students and parents each year. Some students on waiting lists have to wait until grade 10 to enter the program if a spot opens. Certain interests, such as the elementary Hockey Program of Choice, can have so many applicants that the school would have to triple or quadruple its classes to accommodate everyone. Richmond receives applications from across the city for the Sport Academy spaces. Often, students who do not get into the Sport Academy decide to come to Richmond anyway.

It can be difficult to develop admission criteria for students, especially if it involves a fitness test, since one’s precise levels of fitness, strength, agility, flexibility and heart rate can be difficult to determine accurately. Whatever the admission criteria is, if it is used at all, it is an aspect of the Sport Academy that is continually re-visited and discussed in terms of fairness for students. Even though academic assessments can vary from classroom to classroom and school to school, students’ report cards and a teacher’s referral are also typically included in the admission package.

The principal and teachers at Richmond spoke of their admission criteria as an issue that has been open for ongoing evaluation. The current process for admitting students into the Sport Academy is under review and there will be some changes for the 2010-2011 school year, specifically, around some of the physical testing. Specifically, “the testing took too long to do, some of the tests being outdated, and we spent a lot of time this year talking about who is – we
have done this for four years now—what should the portfolio contain, what is the right student for this program?” The admission criteria are something that is evolving. Essentially:

it is a human experiment and…it is like an IQ test, SATs, there is no perfect test you are going to get, and we only have so many seats and we have more kids applying than we have seats and we have to have some way of sorting them.

There is such an open and above-board approach with their admission criteria and such a high level of trust has obviously been developed between the school and the community. The principal’s approach is friendly and sincere: “We are very open about saying ‘this is what it is. It is the best thing we can figure out to do right now’”.

When asked about the role of physical testing, one teacher said it is a small piece and that “physical ability is part of it, but it does not make or break them”. Since students who are in the Sport Academy represent a wide range of sports, it is good to hear the physical test is only a small portion of the admission process. The concern arises because a physical test, which favors certain sports over others would definitely give some students an advantage for admission. It is impressive that the staff is continually discussing this aspect of admission. One would be suspect if a student’s admission into a Sport Academy hinges solely on some sort of set of physical requirements. With Richmond’s approach, they are also looking for parental and coaching support, and student learning skills. Students admitted into the grade 9 program from the elementary school’s Sport Academy have automatic admission and all other interested applicants must apply formally. Some students are highly ranked or recognized in their sport and others are house league level athletes who would like to develop their athletic training. The admission packages have three components: the physical testing process, an interview, and a reference letter from a teacher or a coach and a parent. Physical testing follows a set of physical standards, which were developed when the Sport Academy started. They do not have many complaints
from parents and staff makes the process as transparent as possible. For the interview component, parents can come optionally; the principal said “some do, some do not”. The paperwork from the adults in the student’s life should seek to echo a student’s choice to be a part of the Sport Academy. Parents are told up front about the time, financial, and transportation commitments to help a family decide if the program is the best choice. Teachers were very clear that parents need to have the ‘what are we getting into?’ question addressed, so they can understand how the program functions, and what it can offer students. One teacher said:

for a student to come to [the school] takes a commitment from their parents because they’re signing up for a program that’s only offered in six schools across the country. You got to be pretty committed to the program to take that leap of faith. To then do it for Sport Academy is even more of a commitment that you are asking of the student. So, they are pretty engaged coming in.

In return, the teachers are equally committed to providing a high level of communication so the student can be successful. Richmond teachers have frequent contact with each student’s coach (from his or her chosen sport). Training schedules are a particular concern; as one teacher puts it “because they are training here, it does not mean that their coach is at three nights a week practices is not going to make them train there, so there is definitely the educational piece that the student is caught between”. Overtraining can become a serious (and negative) issue for students, and the Sport Academy teachers ensure they are modifying exercises and reducing physical training so students can avoid strain.

In addition, ongoing dialogue with a student’s coach helps to sort out the competition or play off schedules, so students can peak at the right time and have their schedules adjusted to avoid exhaustion. Teachers strive to eliminate situations where students are training and/or playing eight or nine times per week. They also reduce the number of different sports students are playing at school, and consider playing time versus training time. For basketball players, the
Richmond training model means “you are going to get the ball a whole lot more - which will make you a better player, in a game where you get the ball hardly at all, or at practice where you get it all the time?”, and the teachers find the training model they’re currently using suits a variety of sports.

The emphasis of the training model at Richmond is twofold: to provide athlete-specific training (not skills-specific training) and to offer some flexibility so students can balance athletics and academics. One teacher said, “we are athlete-specific. We do not train sport. We train athletic skills”, basing their training programming on the premise that better athleticism will transfer over to each student’s chosen sport. The teachers believe they have seen results, suggesting “if you are stronger, faster, quicker, more flexible, you are just going to be better at whatever sport you participate in”. Students also benefit from the wide variety of training movements they see and experience, and the teachers hope the students will be active for life, after they stop competing or participating in organized sports and specialized athletic training.

A misconception has arisen that some sort of recruitment process exists. With the exception of those who are involved in the elementary school’s Sport Academy, there is no stream or pathway that leads to Richmond. When asked if students were recruited to Richmond, all of those interviewed said no. One teacher said: “specific students have never been recruited”. They very clearly stated that “they select us, we do not select them”. Teachers and the Principal do an annual tour of nearby or interested elementary schools, and students provide a short film clip of what student life is like at Richmond. A teacher explains the various class offerings that are available and provides an overview of the self-paced, self-directed learning model and the learning skills that need to be demonstrated for it to be successful.
Often, a few students perform musically or dramatically to enhance the idea that Richmond is a school that has something to offer everyone. Parents are also given an overview of what student life is like on Richmond’s website. For those interested in applying to the Sport Academy, there is an Information Night each spring and parents meet the teachers, get information about the program, and current students demonstrate how they use some of the equipment. Everyone who attends these information sessions is openly encouraged to apply if they feel it would be a good choice for their child.

Once students are enrolled in the Sport Academy, some decide it is not the right fit. The grade 9 class of 2009-2010 started with 30 students and the incoming grade 9 class for 2010-2011 has 31 students. There is some decrease in the program’s numbers if students do not like the level of intensity, become injured, or lose interest in their competitive sport. One Sport Academy teacher said, “I think kids get in here, then there is a definite drop off as kids realize it is not for them. Their training has stopped or their desire for athletics at that level has just stopped”. Some students transfer in from other Boards, especially since Richmond’s terrific reputation has developed rapidly and the school has become recognized for its unique training and programming model. A few students have dropped out of the Sport Academy, but liked the school environment and the self-paced, self-directed model so much they decided to stay as a part of the regular Richmond program. They completed grade 9 as Sport Academy students, but really liked the school culture and weeded themselves out of the program.

Since the inception of the Sport Academy, there have been a few students who do not handle the program, its time commitment and the organization that is required to function in the self-paced, self-directed model. To date, no students have been removed from the program for discipline issues. The Sport Academy teachers discussed how difficult it is to see students
struggle, and these students often fall into a pattern of not submitting tasks for marking, and not keeping pace with their class material and learning guides. One teacher said:

They take a year or two to try to guard it and understand how to be successful at it, you do not have to be academically motivated but it does not mean you have to be an independent student, like a university level student, you can be a college level student, you can be a workplace level student. We still offer those courses to everybody. You just, you need to be organized. If you’re not organized, then there is a difference there, so that would be a hard one, and unfortunately we’re probably looking at a couple of students that, it’s just not working, and it’s not fair to them, to have them here just so they can train. ‘Cause other students at the school, if they don’t follow along with the program, they are, I don’t want to say removed from the school, but they’re encouraged to go to another place that’s going to be better for their academic style, their academic learning. You are not guaranteed to stay here just because you are here.

Like most teachers, those interviewed were very disappointed there have been a few students who had difficulty with the Sport Academy program. There is a tremendous sense of cooperation between the teachers, administration, coaches, parents and students, so the teachers seemed saddened when students show a limited level of success. Students are given multiple opportunities over a lengthy period of time to adjust to the flexible programming. The downside of the program’s flexibility is that some students require the structure, which is usually provided in a traditional program. This is not a cream-skimming model where students either float or sink, but rather a model, which has been designed with a focus on flexibility for a different style of learner. If students do not commit to the shared responsibility aspect of this model, or become disengaged, then they need to reconsider their options. It is important to note that Richmond offers all pathways to students and their course offerings reflect a variety of levels for students. The perception that Richmond is an exclusive campus for high-functioning, overachieving, university-bound students is mistaken.
5.4 Equity

There are many layers to any discussion about equity. For the Sport Academy, this mostly translates into the topics of accessibility and socioeconomic status. One positive aspect of the Sport Academy is its focus on the athlete rather than the sport. So, enrollment in organized sports (and the costs attached to a club and coaching) is not necessary. Other Programs of Choice, such as hockey or basketball, have accessibility problems due to the fact not all families can afford the financial and time commitments to be involved in organized sports, thus eliminating any chance of participating in these programs. Richmond’s Sport Academy is open to all sports: “you have got a race car driver working out beside a tap dancer. That is the sort of thing that can happen”.

The administration makes it clear that the Sport Academy is open to everyone, but it is not for everyone. Proponents of choice believe enrichment programs should be provided and what ends up happening naturally is “the students weed themselves out of the program if it is not the best fit”. The Principal relates the Sport Academy to any other program that is offered at Richmond. He said, “it’s no different than our drama program - our drama program is not for everybody. It’s a great program for the drama kids but if I’m inept at acting, that program isn’t for me! And that’s okay.” Embracing the balance of program options, and allowing students to direct their path of self-discovery seem to be key components of Richmond’s success. Serving a larger student population, and having a wide variety of choices in terms of programs, teams and clubs, means there should be something to offer every student. “They are getting great opportunities, but no different than the drama kids are getting an opportunity and access to great resources, the music kids have great instruments that they get to use if they are in the jazz band
versus the grade 9 class. That is just - I think that is a culture in a high school. They get the choice to dabble in something if they just want to dabble”.

The most significant socioeconomic issue is parents’ financial cost to provide transportation and this issue is one of the strongest arguments the literature makes against choice. Some students come from very far away, and their parent(s) drive them to and from school. In a lot of cases, it can be difficult to carpool or access public transit. All of those interviewed mentioned that “kids come to the school from all over the city; most are driven”. The additional costs to purchase and maintain a vehicle can be a barrier for some students. Another barrier is time; a lot of parents have work schedules, which do not allow sufficient time to transport their child to and from school. In other circumstances, the parents work shifts, or it is a single parent situation, and being able to provide transportation is an additional burden. In most cases, parents try their best to find a schedule that fits and see the Sport Academy as a lure to keep their kids engaged in school. They do ‘what it takes’ for their children to access the program.

Equity issues are often raised by parents at other schools, whose children play on opposing sports teams. At the elementary level, school board officials were contacted by upset parents who were outraged that the elementary school was participating in the same league as their school. The perception of a stacked team was a common argument, and it was difficult to argue with, given the significant number of board-wide championships claimed by the elementary school, in most sports. The board came up with a solution: students attending a sport-specific Program of Choice were ineligible to play for the school’s team. If students enrolled in the basketball-focused Program of Choice, they could not play on the school’s basketball team. The solution is successful for at least two different reasons. First of all, this enables children who
are not involved in the Sport Academy to access their school’s sports teams. As well, the school community celebrates athleticism and sportsmanship - for everyone.

As Richmond’s Principal said, “some of our best athletes are not in Sport Academy”, which is a positive sentiment for all students to hear. Students do not complain to the Principal about the Sport Academy students dominating sports teams or getting better equipment to use. According to staff, students represent a variety of backgrounds, which may surprise opponents of choice. Athletically, there are a variety of interests and sports, such as equestrian riders, figure skaters and swimmers. All-around athletes are also represented. All of those interviewed said the students at Richmond and within the Sport Academy reflect a culturally diverse student population. As a school, Richmond is “very diverse for the community where the school is placed”. Socioeconomically and culturally, “we are more of a cross section of Hamilton than if the school was just here, drawing from its local community”.

The male to female ratio “is not always 100% balanced because it depends on applicants, but it is very close to being balanced”. The staff strives to make information about its programs available to everyone with the hope that guidance counselors at other schools were sharing the information to all potential students. As well, the school board could contribute to the dissemination of information by increasing its communications about the Sport Academy to the public and in as many languages as possible.

5.5 Assessment

One of the issues the teachers raised was the role of assessment and how it can be difficult to monitor student progress, especially if students are missing time due to their own sports training. One teacher gave an example of a student who missed training at school, but attended their own club training later that evening. An issue developed with the student’s parent
and the teacher responded: “we cannot give them any marks for a missed day. But there is some…they wonder why? Cannot they just – they went to training that night…can’t their coach tell you? Well, no, it defeats the whole purpose of being an educator”. The balance between offering flexibility and sending the message that school attendance is optional can be a bit tricky. The flex days offered at the secondary level certainly help to get students caught up with missed learning and assignments.

At the elementary level, similar issues emerge around assessment and attendance. Due to training and tournaments, Sport Academy students who miss a lot of school are often given homework packages to make up for the missed classroom time. Some students then started to miss a lot of school days and the absences were unexplained. Other families took extended vacations, sometimes for more than one week. All requested the same homework packages that were intended to support the students’ athletic programming. Teachers became frustrated trying to track student progress and questioned the results of summative data, some of which had to be completed at home because the rest of the class had moved on to the next unit of study. With no formal learning guides and no flex days at the elementary level, teachers are often left to create the homework packages, often on their own time.

Students making the transition from elementary to secondary also have to cope with the potential adjustment to their physical education marks on their report cards. “generally, the kids in these programs are all outstanding athletes. They are used to getting really high physical education marks. When they come here, and they are not getting a 90 or a 95 because they missed training days…”. This can become a problem. Students who demonstrate a high degree of success with the elementary Health and Physical Education curriculum need to make the
adjustment to curricula, that is locally developed and offers challenging expectations as a minimum standard.

5.6 The Benefit for Students

Parents often share their positive stories with the school’s principal. Those who do have been really impressed with the Sport Academy and they see the benefits of it for their child. Parents see the Sport Academy as something that will maintain students’ engagement. It is not a program, which takes at-risk students and increases their engagement. The goal is always to maintain student engagement, as opposed to re-engaging. All of the educators interviewed firmly believe the Sport Academy has benefitted a number of students and the principal had some profound comments to enshrine what Sport Academy provides for its students:

Sometimes we are scared, from a political perspective, to celebrate what people are great at. It is like, if you are offering gifted programming, there is something politically incorrect about that. But if you are offering self-contained programming for autistic children, there is something honorable about that. If you are offering a self-contained class for at-risk students, you are celebrated for that. And I don’t know exactly why that is, and so to put that in the Sport Academy context, if these are kids who need to be challenged, that’s what engages them in school. That is what is engaging them in life, and we can meet that need in our building, for those kids… it isn’t for everybody. What they do athletically is not for the average student. That is okay, because it is meeting their needs.

There is an overwhelming sense the students and parents who are a part of Richmond’s Sport Academy are really happy. In the past two years, there has not been a single complaint about the Sport Academy. So, one of the terrific successes of the program is the overall feeling the students want to be at school every day and they enjoy participating in all aspects of the specialized programming that has been developed with them in mind. Comments such as “I am really proud of what Sport Academy does for students and for our board” are common among its teachers and the principal. The benefit to students is far-reaching, as it seems to have a positive influence on
their lives, and keeps them motivated to maintain a high level of healthy, active living. One teacher said:

I have to highlight…it is about the people. Education is a people business. We can frame it however we want, we can have new ideas, we can redo old ideas…it is about teachers, in the end. It is about the teacher-student relationship. You have got to have the right people running these programs and coordinating these programs and expanding these programs. If you don’t have that, the programs will die. It doesn’t matter how many kids are interested in it. That is not just Sport Academy. If you don’t have the right Mandarin teacher, then you are not going to get enough kids. The program is not going to thrive, and so it is about people. It really is and at Richmond’s Sport Academy program we have the right people...

Richmond S.S. has developed a program to meet the needs of kids, not to stack its school with the best academic and athletic students. To combat whispers of elitism, the programming focuses on developing the athlete rather than a sports star: students learn a lot about their bodies, how to train, and how to balance academic work with physical fitness. At this point in the program’s implementation, the main challenges rest with the school board, its policy and the decision-making around sustainability, staffing, funding and transportation.

Relationships are a key piece of the puzzle. The mutual respect between students, parents, teachers and the school’s administration suggest a climate of student success. The culture of the school and the relationships that have developed over the years are evident in the stories that have been shared:

5.7 Conclusion

When considering the educational literature, “recognizing difference can be seen to undermine or create equity, depending on the politics that surround it” (Gaskell, 1999, p. 23). In the case of Richmond S.S., the school board is willing to allow distinct programming to occur as a way to serve the needs of all students with its self-paced, self-directed programming, and some
students with the Programs of Choice. It is clear that Richmond S.S. is doing something of benefit for the Sport Academy students, perhaps because the programming is matching the needs and interests of the students and the sports-focused programming is a way of enhancing equity by valuing diverse programming. Advocating for difference is often viewed to be undemocratic, especially if students view themselves as ‘different’, “but far from breeding insularity and like-mindedness, this seems to encourage respect and learning across difference” (Gaskell, 1999, p. 16). In other words, recognizing that students require different types of learning may actually build the type of school community that common schools cannot.

There is improvement that could be made in terms of accessibility, funding, transportation, and allowing for more teacher input into the board’s policy. The programming that has been developed for these students is a powerful example of what innovation in education can offer. To those who suggest Programs of Choice are elitist, undemocratic and derail funding from other pathways in the public education system, I offer the words of Gaskell (2001):

…public education must provide space for different groups to have different kinds of schools, within limits set by provincial authorities. The differences that emerge in Canadian schools reflect the beliefs and values of their communities, from Grandy’s River in Newfoundland to downtown Vancouver. There is no common schooling for all Canadians, uneasy as some feel about that fact. Public educational space is fractured, and the fracturing is constitutionally guaranteed. (p. 33)

The school board’s Programs of Choice are Programs of Difference, which support the various learning styles and interests of students who live in the area. Schools that seek to offer this type of programming should definitely look to the model that has been implemented at Richmond and leave lots of room for site-specific input from the teachers who will be developing the program. It would benefit students if a school board would develop a policy that honours the creativity and motivation of the teachers who are making these programs successful. The challenge for school boards is the determination of which programs of difference could
benefit all students, some students, or a few students, and then direct resourcing, staffing and funding accordingly.
References


Burgess, M. T. (2006). *Factors Affecting the Adoption of Alternative Programs For Mainstream Students in Publicly-Funded School Boards*. Thesis submitted to the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, OISE/UT.


Appendix A

April 2009

Policy No. 7.17

Programs of Choice Policy

Date Approved: Projected Review Date: 04/23/2012

Policy Statement
It is the policy of the School Board to support innovative programs within its schools and enhance student achievement by responding to stakeholder needs through the adoption of approved Programs of Choice.

RESPONSIBILITY: Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice.

Definition:
Programs of Choice is used to define non-Ministry mandated, unique, innovative learning programs in focused areas, designed to engage students who have differing educational interests. The programs have the capacity to develop a broad range of skills and further enhance character development, academic achievement, and leadership development and may include languages, environmental studies, the arts and fitness and wellness. These programs compliment subjects/courses consistent with the Ontario Curriculum however, offer specialized learning opportunities that develop skills with greater depth and intensity. Students may enter a Program of Choice at different elementary and secondary grade levels based on program availability and admission criteria. Secondary Programs of Choice may contribute to a Ministry approved Specialist High Skills Major when a career-focused pathway offering opportunities in apprenticeship, college, university and workplace exists.

1. Guiding Principles:
Programs of Choice must:
- Conform to The Education Act, Board policies, collective agreements and an approved Programs of Choice Implementation Plan
- Adhere to the highest standards of programming excellence expected by the Board, the community, the associated partners and the parents and students in the program
- Align with the Board’s Vision, Mission and Core Commitments
- Endeavour to provide accessibility for all students

2. Policy Objectives
Programs of Choice will endeavour to strengthen public education by:
- Supporting student achievement by helping students meet provincial standards and the intended outcomes of the Program of Choice
- Offering high quality, innovative educational programs in focused areas
- Attracting, retaining and engaging students with differing educational interests
- Attracting, retaining and engaging staff with specialized knowledge, skills and training
- Increasing parent involvement and satisfaction

3. A statement of intended outcome:
Programs of Choice are a means by which HWDSB can:
- Realize its vision of ensuring a future in which all learners achieve their full potential
- Attract and retain students and families who view us as a Board of Choice that offers dynamic programming to meet the diverse needs and interests of the community
- Respond to parental requests for programs in specialized areas that meet the unique needs of students across our district.
• Develop career-focused pathways for existing Programs of Choice to become Specialist High Skills Major

4. Action Required:

4.1 Programs of Choice can be initiated by a community group or school staff in the community who approach the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice with a specific Program of Choice proposal.

• If the proposal originates from school staff in the community, it must be supported by the school administration, the School Council, the school Superintendent of Education and the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice.

• If the proposal originates from the community it must have the support of the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice, Executive Council and the Board of Trustees.

• The location of all Programs of Choice will be at the discretion of the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice and Executive Council. There will be no stand-alone Programs of Choice entertained by the Board.

4.2 Potential Programs of Choice that meet the criteria identified above will be provided with a Programs of Choice Application Proposal Form.

• Programs of Choice Application Proposal Forms are completed and submitted to the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice. The Superintendent, in consultation with the school Superintendent of Education and school administration will decide on whether or not to support the idea.

• Once approved a Programs of Choice Implementation Plan is completed.

• A Programs of Choice Implementation Plan must include the rationale for the program and how the program will address the guiding principles and intended outcomes of Programs of Choice.

• Final approval, prior to the commencement of any new Program of Choice requires that the Implementation Plan along with any supporting information is presented to the Programs of Choice Proposal Review Committee.

• The process is summarized in Appendix A.

4.3 The Programs of Choice Proposal Review Committee will be composed of the following:

1. Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice
2. Trustee of the Board
3. Parent Involvement Committee Member
4. Elementary Teacher
5. Secondary Teacher
6. Elementary Administrator
7. Secondary Administrator
8. non-parent ratepayer
9. Elementary Student Leader
10. Secondary Student Leader

4.4 Once the Programs of Choice Proposal Review Committee has reviewed the implementation of a new Program of Choice the program will be referred to Executive Council for final approval. Proposals brought forward by a community group must have the approval of the Board of Trustees. If approved, the program will be considered to be in a Pilot Year. See Appendix B.

4.5 Pilot Year Requirements:

• Implement program as per proposal
• Present status report to the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice prior to the end of the Pilot Year
• If the report demonstrates that the program is viable, as determined by positive student achievement, student engagement, and parent satisfaction data, it will be recommended that the program continue. Alternatively if it is shown to not be viable a recommendation may be made that the program is discontinued.
• At the end of year 2 the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice with require a review of the Program of Choice conducted by external reviewers from outside the and/or with a report being presented to Executive Council.

4.6 Programs of Choice Resourcing:
• Financial and other resource considerations in support of Programs of Choice will be determined through the collaborative efforts of the school administration, the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice, Board personnel and Executive Council.
• Staffing considerations in support of each program, based on specialized training and qualifications, will be determined by the staffing process, the Superintendent of Operations in consultation with the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice and school administration.
• Resource allocation will be reviewed annually by the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice.

5. Key Measures of Success:
• A formal program review will be completed every 3 years by school administration, school staff and/or EBEST and reported to the Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice, Executive Council and included as part of the annual report to the Board of Trustees. As part of the review process evidence must be presented to demonstrate growth in student achievement, student engagement, and parent satisfaction.
• In addition to the formal program review, for an elementary Program of Choice to be considered viable, it must have a sufficient number of students to run one full class and generate 1 FTE teaching position according to staffing protocols. If the enrolment numbers fall below this minimum for two years consideration will be given to discontinue the program.
• In addition to the formal program review, for a secondary Program of Choice to be considered viable, it must generate enough student interest to warrant the allocation of staffing lines. If the enrolment numbers fall below an acceptable threshold that make it financially viable for two years, consideration will be given to discontinue the program.
• If the existing POC grows successfully beyond the current capacity of the existing building as indicated in the mandatory review process consideration may be given to moving/expanding the POC to an additional location as determined by an extensive review of all data sources, including the Capital Plan, with the final decision being made by the Superintendent responsible for Programs and Choice in consultation with Executive Council and where necessary the Board of Trustees.

6. Reporting Requirements:
The Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice will prepare an annual report for Board as part of the Trustees’ Annual Work Plan. The Superintendent responsible for Programs of Choice will make bi-annual reports to Executive Council based on the how the programs align with the Strategic Direction and Annual Operating Plans including:
• Program viability as determined by student and parent engagement and satisfaction surveys
• Growth potential of the programs as projected over a 3 year period
• Growth potential to evolve into SHSM when programs have a career focus
• Financial viability as determined by the allocation of school and central funds
• Academic viability as determined by student achievement data
• Retention and attraction of students as determined by analysis of enrolment data
• Partnership viability as determined through consultation with associated organization and groups
• Student access to programs from all parts of the district as determined by an analysis of demographic information

7. References to related policies/policy directives:
• Equity Policy
• Information Technology Policy
• Collective Agreements for all employee groups
- Purchasing/Procurement Policies
- OCT Standards of Teaching Practice
Appendix B

Programs of Choice: Successes and Challenges

Research Questions

1. What types of choice programs are currently being offered at the school and how did they come to exist?
2. Are there any special types of support to these programs, such as funding or transportation? Do you think these programs need additional support to do well now and in the future?
3. How has the balance between regular programming and choice programs been achieved? Is the model at Richmond something that could benefit students at other schools?
4. Do you think Programs of Choice have benefitted students? Have they improved student engagement? Can you share a story about a student who is a good example of a success or a challenge of Programs of Choice?
5. Have there been any problems with admission criteria, such as identifying which students are ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the Programs of Choice?
6. Typically, what is the background of students who are selected for the programs? Are students recruited? Do you feel that students represent a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds?
7. Are there any challenging circumstances of the students? Have students ever been removed from the programs? If so, for what reasons?
8. What is the background of teachers who are selected to teach the programs? Have there ever been any staffing concerns?
9. Are there different challenges posed by different feeder schools, such as the elementary school? What advice would you offer feeder schools?
10. Is there a process for hearing feedback about the program (feedback from teachers, administrators, parents, or students?) Are there checkpoints along the way? How does the school make changes to any programs that are offered or decide to launch new ones?
11. Are there any other comments you’d like to make?