



An AIMS Breakfast Briefing

with

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Charles Cirtwill, AIMS acting President: Over the past 12 years, AIMS has focused on education as a constant theme. In fact, one of the earliest conferences AIMS held was around the concept of charter schools and what impact the introduction of 'charter schools' in Atlantic Canada could have for improving the public system, creating a little bit of competitive pressure.

AIMS followed up with some work in the area of the urban myth which surrounds standardized testing and the evils of teaching to the test.

AIMS largest project in the Institute's history is its annual high school report card that is done in all four Atlantic Province, and it's close to expanding that into at least two other provinces and hopefully a couple of states. It is expected to see some real movement in the next six to eight months.

With the publication of the High School report cards and working with our partners such as, Progress, in past four years in Atlantic Canada. AIMS has shifted the debate about whether you could measure educational performance to what you should measure and how you can do it appropriately. The Institute's perspective now is looking at a shift in that debate again to who should have the information and what you can do with it once you have it.

Edmonton is the model for public schools, not only in Canada but, in fact, in North America. There are several books now that have done an analysis of Edmonton comparing it to various other models and multiple researchers have concluded from various descriptions that Edmonton is the model for public schools. Public schools can succeed; there's not a need or a necessity for people to take their kids out of the public schools and put them into private schools. That is a powerful message, particularly for the debate here in Canada where we have a very passionate defence mechanism for our public institutions, particularly public schools.

In the commentary, Angus explains about what they've done in Edmonton, how they've made their public schools competitive in a very open and accountable environment and how they've driven private schools out of business or taken them over in a corporate expansion.

In Edmonton, nobody's ever been dying for reform, but managed to have some anyway. I guess that's true for almost anything. It's true for people who go on diets, get fit, stop smoking. Any kind of reform effort, whether it's personal or institutional, takes a lot of willpower and, unfortunately, practice and work, sticking to it and getting through the hard times. Because, indeed, any reform movement is, like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has stated, it's a "death, dying, and grieving" and we have to go through all of those in order to reform."

Angus McBeath: I want to say, first and foremost, that for me the most powerful work, paid work, done in society is done by teachers. Teachers have no less a job than transforming the lives of children. Teachers take the children who come, regardless of who they are, who their parents are, what their ethnic, economic and other background is and ensure that they learn to read, write, think, compute, lead and grow up to lead economically sustainable lives.

Everyday, regardless who the children are, I believe that teachers have the power and the means, in most cases, to do that work. I can think of no children in society that we would not want to ensure that they were high school graduates.

Teachers take a bad rap in society, in my view; consistently take a bad rap in society. I had the great luxury last year being able to watch the Olympics in Turin, and one day an Edmonton woman won the gold medal for speed skating. I can't remember her name, but her photo was flashed around the world and people in Edmonton thought they were really important because of work that someone else had done. And we were all proud because this woman was from Edmonton and from Alberta, and she was more importantly a Canadian and not someone else from another country. All of that attention and recognition went to this person and that was great, she deserved recognition and attention.

But at the same time, during the Turin Olympics, a teacher taught a student how to do a quadratic equation, a teacher finally convinced a child to write a sentence with a capital letter and a punctuation mark, and a teacher actually persuaded a child to read a sentence with more than one or two words in it and had meaning.

You may not have read about that, or you may not have seen a photograph taken of

that happening, or you may not have watched video at 6:00 pm of a teacher doing that work, because the work that teachers do happens behind closed doors. No camera has ever looked into classrooms because people think of teaching as, "Well, I turned the tap on this morning and there was water, I sent my children to school and they're being taught." We take for granted this vital public service for which we could not survive.

Now I cannot speak for Nova Scotia because I've been away too long and I wouldn't have the nerve to talk about here, but I can tell you some things we did in Edmonton to try and change public education.

Public education is almost impervious to change. It's reform ridden and reform resistant. It's like public health care or any great public institution, organized not to change.

Maybe people go into it with the belief that it's permeable and changeable, but there are many, many ways that public education makes sure it doesn't change and why should it change. About 30 years ago in Edmonton, we had a very complacent system and were very happy with how it was running there wasn't much public criticism. I don't think anybody would have taken a bullet for it, but people were pretty content with how the system was running. The superintendent of the day said, Well, what if we looked at Edmonton 30 or 40 years down the road and what if the conditions weren't quite the same. The desire was to make the system a little more competitive and a little less complacent. So we adopted, about 32 years ago, a policy of internal school choice, which means that any student in Edmonton can go to any school they want to within the whole city.

At this point in time last year, about 57 per cent of all K to 12 students went to a school that was not their designated school showing parents like choice in our city. In fact, from whatever political sleight, including teachers, would not allow the city, the Edmonton district, to remove that local school choice from them because it is so institutionalized.

That change in the context was viciously opposed by anybody in central office who immediately knew it was going to be more work. Claming parents were too stupid to

make their decisions about where to send their children that it would discriminate against poor people because poor parents, in particular, have no wits about them. I can tell you that parents from low-income families, move their children around as fast as people from other communities, we build many of our programs of choice in low-income areas of the city to induce children from all over the city to go to different kinds of schools.

Administrative back striding and administrative obfuscation helped make this transition to internal choice very difficult. This was an attempt to make the system more competitive without using those words, because you're not allowed to talk about competition in education; it's considered an unwholesome thing to say. It means that you're talking about education like it's a commodity or something in business.

What changed was this; in the spring every year in Edmonton families and children go shopping for schools in Edmonton meaning every school competes. You can't drive down a boulevard without seeing signs in front of every school talking about the qualities and things they offer in their building.

Competing for children is considered a healthy thing. However, we have to step in occasionally and stop some unethical practices like, 'Our teachers are smarter than your teachers.' Schools depend on getting students because schools in Alberta are funded based on students' in seats on September 30th, unless you are a high school student and then school listings don't get money unless the students actually complete courses meaning you don't get paid until the work is done and the students have been successful and that's real incentive for the schools and teachers.

Now in Edmonton, people have four choices of publicly-funded education, which I personally applaud and wish there were more. There are two public-school districts that occupy the same ground, competing with each other for students; one is a Roman Catholic school system and the other is a public-public system, but students interchangeably go to both and the money follows them. There are charter schools that are publicly funded and private schools that are funded at 2/3rds of the rate of the public schools. Leaving not only internal choice in Edmonton but also giving other choices within the system.

Everybody else in Alberta, apart from Edmonton, decided to fight the provincial government. When Ralph Klein decided he was going to subsidize private schools and fund charter schools, everyone decided to fight him on that. Our position is they got almost 95 per cent of the seats. What if he's successful at implementing this? We had two choices: we can go out of business or we can out-compete the private schools and the charter schools.

Therefore, we elected to be more competitive than the rest of the system. What we did started a long time ago; we started about 35 programs of choice within the city.

A program of choice could be anything from performing arts, elementary, middle school, junior high school, high school, through a school that offers students I.B., International Baccalaureate or advanced placement.

We have Christian education offered throughout the city in various parts of schools, an awful lot of school. We have a hockey school. We have a ballet program with a cadet program in the same building. We have guns ... (laughter) ... and tutus. We have science and technology schools. We have schools with particular kinds of methodologies, teaching methodologies.

The upshot is that parents have building choice, but they also have program choice and I'd say the vast majority of our parents exercise their choice to take their children to one of those programs throughout the city.

Many of those programs of choice are located mostly in low-income neighbourhoods because we want those neighbourhoods to have the opportunity and making sure that transportation is not the issue keeping children from going and exercising choice.

There was a huge amount of discontent when we started the Christian programs in Edmonton. First of all, we lobbied the provincial government to change the School Act to make it possible to offer religious instruction. We had been offering a Jewish school for about 30 years and we have Arabic language and culture schools because we have a huge Lebanese and Muslim/Islamic population. When we decided to offer

Christian education mainly because the biggest private schools in Edmonton were Christian and we couldn't reach those children. Hence, the School Act was changed to make it possible to have all those programs with religious instruction.

I remember a member of the Alberta Teachers' Association threatened me to go to jail because they believed what we were doing was illegal, immoral and unethical. I responded by commenting "if I'm breaking the law, if we're breaking the law, I'm sure, you know, a stint in jail would be pleasant. I think you should take us to court and prove that we are breaking the law" and that was about 10 years ago, so I'm still on the lamb.

But the great irony was this; when we opened up the Christian education places to parents, we drained the private sector and the charter sector of most of their kids.

I said to the teachers, and here's the deal, any teacher in Alberta who is teaching in a charter or a private school, Christian school, those teachers do not belong to the Alberta Teachers Association, which is our teachers' union.

Now what if we brought in 7,000 kids? What if we added enough teachers to teach 7,000 in the Christian program? They would all be paying dues to the Alberta Teachers Association. Those would be Alberta-certified teachers. That would be 7,000 kids, times whatever the provincial funds coming to the public schools. What would that do for the overhead expenses of the public system to add 7,000 kids and all their money?

So people listened and they weren't thrilled. However, that wasn't the last thing that we did to raise the attention span in some people, but we had certainly grabbed the Christian market, forgive that phrase, but there were three massive private schools in Edmonton that we couldn't get. So we went into negotiations with them and we brought in all three private Christian schools and they'd joined the public system and they brought in thousands of young people into the public fold.

Meanwhile, the private fold is feeling pretty badly. There's virtually nothing left. There's a violin school. There is a very fundamental Orthodox Islamic school where the women teachers have to wear burkas. And we decided not to adopt them

because they wanted us to hire teachers without qualifications and we wouldn't do that because if you join Edmonton, you've got to follow the School Act and all the Board's policies and regulations. I think there's a couple of other charter privates that are very small and just could not fit under the public umbrella. However, we literally drained the charter and private schools. Why I like private and charter schools, because I believe in Edward Demming's belief, that if your competition dies, worry. Because the charter and private schools give parents a release, a safety valve to get out if we're not serving them. It makes us feel more on our toes because we know the parents have choice, we know if we serve the children badly that we might lose them. Rather than all those who enter here abandon hope because we have got you and you have no choice.

What if all the students who attended your school actually were there because they wanted to be there? What if parents believed that they had the choice and that because the population had grown from about 72,000 to about 82,000 as a result of just opportunities.

When we brought in the first Christian school into Edmonton Public, the Board had to vote on it and the Board votes weren't there. They were terrified because people were saying you can't do this, nobody else in North America has Christian education within the public wings. What if somebody comes and wants to teach devil worship, you know, would you adopt them, or the Scientologists come and we said, Well, they have to make a case.

Right now, you know, we're being asked to adopt Edmonton's biggest Christian school. After all sorts of heart attacks and stress and grief and upset, when the third Christian school came to Board about two and a half, three years ago, I remember I was superintendent then, there wasn't a single question and no one in the audience.

So we had gone from this will destroy public education, this will put the Christians in charge of the whole school district to, Oh yeah, we'll vote on that. Because people had realized that the world did not end when we had made all these changes.

Changing public systems are really hard because everybody is against change. Now everybody thinks they're a change agent until they have to change. I've probably

been in 23 United States and Canadian cities talking about school change in the last year and every city I go to, people are worried that they're going to lose their jobs or that the whole house of cards will crash down. It's okay in Edmonton, because you don't have a union. That's what people say to me; "Well, it must be easy in Edmonton because you don't have any poor children." Not true. The truth of the matter is that we don't have any unions or poor children. We have a huge aboriginal population who is as destitute and as unfortunate as any group of children you've ever seen in poorest city in the United States .

We have four unions in Edmonton public schools and we have to work with them. Some people are surprised in the United States, I'm told, because they can't do anything because the union won't let them. To that I said I'd like to check your legislation. Where does it say you can't do better work in your School Act or your Education Act in your state? Where does it say in your state or province are not allowed to do better work because the union won't let them; show me that clause in the legislation? I think that's a common statement that people are worried about unions.

My last point, I think our biggest worry in Edmonton was that after we had opened up schools to choice and lots of other things, and growing our population and we had become quite famous, and we were very happy just to be famous. However, we had a very hard look about six years ago at our achievement results and graduation rate. We were appalled to discover that we were only graduating about 63 per cent of our population. We then knew and people said, Well, that's true because look who we teach and look at the people that send their kids to us because this would not happen in Nova Scotia.

In Alberta, it's a routine thing to blame the results in school on the parents and we decided that since the parents had sent us their very best and weren't keeping their good ones at home that our job was to teach all who came. Instead of blaming our teachers and principals, we said, what if our principals and teachers actually don't know how to do their work to the extent possible? As a result we've poured huge efforts in Edmonton into training principals and teachers. I advised the principals to spend 50 per cent of the instructional day in classrooms. If I had asked them to go to Mars, I think it would have received no less-cheery a reception.

I said the most important work that takes place in schools takes place in classrooms. What if teachers, as good as teacher colleges are, do not know how to teach kids how to read, write, think, compute. What if they actually don't know? What if teachers are using the methodologies they graduated with or the methodologies they picked up and what if they used those methodologies without change for 30 years; is that possible?

We hire teachers, we put them in rooms, we lock the door and we leave them there for 30 years. And then we criticize them because some of them go bad, some of them lose their edge and some of them are not using practices that are actually research-based and have been proven to work.

So we spent the last five years intensively training teachers and principals, a lot of it against their will, at least initially. We measure results at the district level at every grade, from 1 to 9, and provincially at 3, 6, 9 and 12, and we make the results are public. Each school has to set standards relative to how much improvement they're going to get every year relative to their provincial and district results. We were told that that destroys children. I was told that we were destroying children by measuring the results or that we can't measure everything teachers teach or everything that students should learn. It is much like looking at a CAT Scan or MIR, it doesn't reveal absolutely everything about the patient but I imagine it reveals some stuff about the patient that's worth knowing.

We do measure achievement and we do publish it so that we raise the outcome for kids. Teachers are now feeling much better because most of the effort and the money spent in Edmonton now is spent on classrooms and spent on teacher training and supporting teachers and principals in rooms and when principals went in rooms, they didn't know what to look for and they didn't know how to help teachers. Principals were traditionally busy with parents, discipline, fundraising, dealing with Central Office, rules and compliance. Yet now that we've trained them, have our results gone through the roof? I don't think so. We went from 63 per cent of our kids graduating to somewhere the low 70's. About 88 per cent of our Grade 3's, 4's, 5's, 6's read at grade level. Is that good enough? No.

If you desegregate out our aboriginals' achievement (we have students voluntarily tell us whether they're aboriginal or not). The aboriginal achievement of our students is much lower compared to the general population and that's something that I think in most provincial data about student achievement, we do not separate out racial or economic groups. The problem with that for me is you hide racism in the general data.

I read a publication which was released about two years ago from the learning partnership in Ontario where they concluded that, based on the international test, Canadian children were doing very well, thank you very much.

The Toronto school district has decided to separate out its African-Caribbean, African-Canadian data because they believe in Toronto that they had a very serious problem with the achievement of some of their children. Lots of people opposed that. However, I think that we need to expose all children's achievement, by looking at the sub-groups to make sure that everyone is getting their fair share of the educational entitlement.

None of this was easy, mostly hard work, but fortunately we've been able to keep the reforms that we've done and I think it's made our system better. The hardest part was getting people to agree and support it and go along with it.

Question & answer session after the speech:

Q. Do principals have choices on teachers?

A. Yes. Principals advertise positions and teachers compete for positions in schools. The district hires the teachers but the principals select.

Q. And what about teachers that they feel are not performing to their standard?

A. Well, in Alberta, the provincial government and the Alberta Teachers' Union and the Association and the school boards have agreed to a common set of procedures relative to weak performance. In the first instance, teachers are provided lots of support, and then they develop an improvement plan and then they are required to meet the goals of the improvement plan. We provide extra support, as a system, to help principals deal with weak performance because that's a weakness in public education, generally. And principals in rooms has made a huge

difference to the identification of teachers who are struggling; quite often struggling because we let them struggle and we don't support them.

Q. Am I making the correct assumption that there is performance management systems in place for teachers?

A. I think there's an emerging performance management system; I can say in Edmonton and I think there is a performance management system, but it's one that's come very slowly and been a lot of push around but, yes, there is a performance management system, and it is doable. You can measure teaching. It's not just by standardized tests and I draw the line that we're going to just use standardized tests and make big judgments on the teachers, there have to be multiple requirements.

Q. You indicated that high schools are compensated based on the number of students that can successfully complete their courses. Have there been issues around maybe pushing students through, graduating them just to receive the funding?

A. Well, you could try doing it, except that high school students don't graduate unless they write provincial examinations and they're hard to fake. We also have standardized exams and we have a lot of common exams throughout the city. So high schools, to be fair to them, don't do that, because we audited them and caught them up to some mischief and then we fine them. One school, I fined \$500,000 for misbehaviour because schools in Edmonton get 92 cents on the dollar of the revenues that the district gets, they manage the resources. So there was a little industry going on that we audited with auditors and found out. I shouldn't be telling this story here but, you know, that changed their behaviour.

Q. How many schools have closed as a result of lack of students?

A. Some schools closed and I'm glad you raised that, because two years ago we closed four schools. It was a very painful experience because the parents, you know, rose up... The school district is responsible for making the final decision after an agonizing process. I said it isn't the school board that's closing this school. This school has a population that can hold 1300 kids. 400 are left, 900 moved to other schools in Edmonton. You tell me who closed this school.

Q. And what happened to those that were still there? I mean, not the students, but to the teachers?

A. Well, those teachers moved to where there are job openings in schools where people want to attend. So we don't lay off teachers because that individual school shrank or we closed that school; those teachers move where there are other opportunities. But parent choice does change that dynamic and there are some schools you can't save because they won't be saved.

Q. To follow up on that, Angus, clearly, you know, part of what's driving the choice system is exactly a process where you described where parents and children have choices and they're shifting population among the schools as people find better choices than the ones they used to have. Presumably what that does is it reveals the schools that are in decline as the population shift away from it. Presumably you don't just sort of sit and watch and then one day, Oh, 400 kids; we close the door. There must be a process, because what this is doing is sending you information all the time about the attractiveness of schools, there must be a strategy for dealing with decline.

A. There is a strategy for dealing with decline. There is a process of identifying the potential population for each school. Then if the school is in decline, there are 10 on the watch list right now, published about three or four weeks ago and those schools will all have opportunities to work with their communities to see if they want to identify an alternative, to see if they want to change the nature of the programming you're offering. So we put them on fairly strong life support. Not all schools are willing, I remember one of the schools who closed, a middle-class school, they had rejected two alternative program offers. I don't know whether they realized at the time, the community, that when they were rejecting the alternatives, they were really closing the school.

Q. What would be the extent of challenges of having a similar system in Nova Scotia?

A. What would be the challenges in Nova Scotia? I don't live here and I don't know. I think the challenges would be the same as in Edmonton. First of all, you know, you can't measure achievement. Parents aren't smart enough to make good choices. The first argument is we couldn't release our achievement information in the

early days because the superintendent was told parents were too stupid in Edmonton to understand achievement data. So there are lots of challenges. I think all of us are a challenge to reform, because we're the people in the community and in society and part of the educational system. All of us are. I think education is the most conservative public service in the world. It's really scary to make a reform because you could make a mistake. But we make mistakes. The current model represents lots of mistakes. And if you aren't adopting a reform movement that improves results, what you're saying is we're happy with the current model. What's the worst thing that would happen if you made a change or two? Well, if you get it wrong, tell everybody you got it wrong and don't do it anymore. If you try something and it works, then it gives you courage to try something else. It takes a lot of patience and perseverance because the people at the top in school systems, Departments of Education, superintendents, senior administrators in school systems, they're the most least-interested in reform, in my view and in my experience. So I think it takes a lot of courage and I would focus on three or four things instead of focusing on 20 things.

Q. I ran for school board, I've got some opinions locally and it's an important issue.

A. I think the pace at which Edmonton reformed was absolutely controlled by the school board. None of the things we did in Edmonton would have happened without the school board. Not that it was their idea to do everything we ended up doing, but they became absolutely crucial because they were the ones that had to face the public and our staff when initially there would be discontent around what we were contemplating, and they did set some broad framework that allowed us to change. I remember when the Board adopted a mission statement that said "Edmonton's Public School Board - Champions of Choice." That was the very first phrase. They adopted it before they really knew what it meant. But you know what, it really gave us the power then to go back to subsequent boards and say, This Board, until further notice, has told us they're champions of choice, and here's one element of choice we'd like you to consider. So they were wonderful in supporting us and they helped worked over the MLAs and the government to get some legislative changes that we think made it easier. They certainly bask in the glory of getting all of the recognition that Edmonton gets, other than just for hockey and so I think the Board would not go backwards, although sometimes Board members, newly elected, would say, Well,

why do we give so much choice? Doesn't it cost a lot? You know, why would we do all of this? And there are other Board members longer in the tooth. So I mean in some ways school boards are luckier than any other authority because they're closest to the action and a school board can do a lot of good locally.

Q. How big is your Board and how big is your school system?

A. The system is about 80,000 students and our Board is nine people, elected from wards. They're all elected on the same day as mayor and city council; once every three years.

Q. What happens when 1,500 want to go to a school that only holds 1,000? How do you rank those students and decide who goes where?...

A. Thank you for raising something that's unpleasant every spring. We have schools that get reputations where there's over-subscription. The first rule we have is every child who lives in the neighbourhood or the catchment area has first entitlement to that school. We give every student a passport in March and they have to turn their passport in by April 30th. So we get kids to pre-commit by April 30th. They take their passport and visit the schools and then they select a school and they hand their passport over. But when we get an over-subscribed school, and we do, first of all, local students get to decide whether they want to attend there. And then, if there are spaces left over, all the names are put into the computer and there's a random selection. And we had lots of fights over that whole issue because, yeah, we have about, I'd say, a dozen over-subscribed schools.

Q. If the high schools are paid by passes, wouldn't there be a certain reluctance to accept the hard cases?

A. There's a great deal of reluctance in every school, in every high school in Edmonton, to accept the hard-luck cases. What our rule is you will take the children who live in your community, regardless come hell or high water, and including special needs students and students who may not behave quite as well as you would wish, I think that amazingly increasingly good work with students who traditionally weren't very welcome in schools. It is likely cheaper not to take them, but these students, too, can generate credits and gain money for the school because the student may only finish three courses out of five, for example, if they finish three courses, that generates revenues for the schools.

Q. Just as a supplement to that, Angus, can you talk a little bit about the weighted student formula?

A. Traditionally, money in Edmonton was decided in Central Office so everything worked on a formula. You got this many teachers, teacher aids, librarians, whoever, based on the formula on how many kids you had. Over the years, we have allocated to our schools 92 cents on the dollar that we collect from the provincial government because there's no local taxation because our Board didn't behave well and all boards in Alberta lost local taxation of property in 1994 in our alleged debt crisis.

Schools even get service from Central Office. They buy the service either from Central Office or the private sector. For example, if you want painting done in our system, the schools will submit specifications and, if they want, they can have a district painter and they can even say who the name of that person is or they can ask our Purchasing Department to run a tender and the lowest tender would win, provided they meet specifications.

So that's in order to foster a sense of ownership at the school level for how the money is used. But how do we get the money to the schools? We collect the money from the province. The province's money is largely pupil-driven, except when there are political issues and then the province ties the money in order to make a point.

We developed a waiting system to get the money to schools. It's based on how many students there are and what level of severity of special need there is, what level of poverty is within the school meaning with low-income students you will generate more money. It's about a 13-layer allocation system that generates money to schools so that if children have severe disabilities, that would generate maybe six, seven, eight times the money a regular student would. And then you have to live on the money you got. And nobody comes to Central Office to get more money because all the money is in the schools. The Central Office people keep their jobs if the schools want to buy their services and if nobody wants your service, I guess you're irrelevant to the system and that has happened sometimes.

CHARLES CIRTWILL: We pride ourselves on trying to end on time and I think we've hit just about right on, thanks to Angus. So he's available certainly afterwards to have

a chat and we can put you in contact over the long term. So we thank everybody for coming and we hope you pay attention not only to the work that Angus is doing for us. As he mentioned, he's traveling to many boards and districts across North America, sending this message, working directly with administrators, encouraging them to take a hard look at how they can make public schools as effective as they possibly can.