

Edmonton's schools lead North America, study finds

Book praises 'revolution'

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Edmonton has one of the most decentralized and effectively managed public school systems in North America, according to a new book that praises the city's educators for leading a "revolution."

William Ouchi, author of *Making Schools Work*, studied 223 schools in six cities and found Edmonton is the best run in terms of offering parents accountability and choice. Mr. Ouchi, a professor of management at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), argues that poor management and lack of accountability are at the heart of problems in education, not class size, teacher training or funding.

Mr. Ouchi looked at the three largest and most centralized districts in the United States (New York, Los Angeles and Chicago), the largest Catholic districts in America in those same cities, three school districts he deemed to be successful (Edmonton, Seattle and Houston), and six independent schools (one in each of the six cities).

He found that in Edmonton, 65% of school board money goes directly to the classroom -- the highest of all the cities he compared.

In New York, for example, only 53% goes to the classroom. He also ranked the districts on the amount of per-school money that is directly controlled by principals -- Edmonton, at 92%, came out ahead of the American cities studied and significantly ahead of New York (6%) and Los Angeles (7%). In many districts, he points out, the money is given to schools but most of it is controlled by central office or union contracts, rather than principals.

In Edmonton, schools decide how to spend money on everything from psychologists to snow removal crews. Principals also have discretion to allocate classroom resources as needed. In some schools, for example, class sizes have been reduced and extra teachers added in younger grades to improve reading skills at the expense of slightly larger classes in the older grades.

Mr. Ouchi argues that Edmonton's system best meets what he outlines as the "seven keys to success" -- entrepreneurial principals, school-controlled budgets, accountability, decentralization, a strong focus on student achievement, school choice and a community approach, meaning there is a consistent set of beliefs among school staff about how to meet students' needs and use available resources.

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CREDIT: Gregory Southam, CanWest News Service

Edmonton school children Megan Corbett, Todd Moser, Levi Stamp and Baillie Gladue read during a Grade 2 class. A study by a U.S. professor of 223 schools in six cities has found Edmonton schools offer parents accountability and choice.

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