Policy Brief

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The Edmonton Public Schools Story: Internationally Renowned Superintendent Angus McBeath Chronicles His District's Successes and Failures

by Angus McBeath

Introduction by Ryan S. Olson, D. Phil.

Angus McBeath, the former superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools, has a powerful story to tell Michigan school officials and school boards. Faced with budget battles, declining enrollments and tense contract negotiations, Michigan school leaders could seize upon the advice of a superintendent and educator who has faced the very same issues for 30 years and who now consults with school districts. If they do pay close attention, they will be in good company. McBeath's work is touted by educators and scholars around the world, and he has been featured in stories in The Economist and Education Week.

McBeath (pronounced "McBeth") advocates giving meaningful professional support to teachers, who have, he argues, "the power to change lives." Drawing on his experience leading an 80,000-student urban district, McBeath encourages public school districts to "outcompete" private schools and charter public schools by attracting parents to send children to district schools. He suggests that districts move to a "site-based management" model, where important budget and operational decisions are made by principals and school leadership teams. He exhorts districts to have a "sense of urgency" about student achievement and graduation rates, and he talks about what galvanized Edmonton's teachers and administrators to help more students perform at grade level and graduate from high school.

On the morning of Sept. 13, 2006, McBeath made a presentation at Grand Valley State University to superintendents and business leaders from Kent and Ottawa counties. Winning strong support from those leaders, McBeath also delivered his speech to legislators and media in Lansing at a noon Issues and Ideas Forum hosted by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

This publication is a transcript of his presentation at the Lansing forum and his responses to questions from the forum's attendees. The transcript has been lightly edited, but his remarks otherwise appear as they were delivered. A final section on Page 17 provides Web addresses for articles and audio clips related to McBeath's visit to Michigan and his work with public school districts.

One final note: Regular readers of Mackinac Center publications will see that McBeath expresses himself differently than Mackinac Center analysts would on a few topics, such as the desirability of having public schools absorb private schools. But it is worth remembering that McBeath speaks both as an analyst of the education marketplace and as a competitor and supplier within that marketplace. For instance, as a marketplace competitor, he talks about trying to drive private schools out of business, while as an analyst, he freely admits, "I love charter schools and private schools because they keep us on our toes." Similarly, as a supplier of education, he refuses to assume that parental choice alone will make his teachers better and insists on internal quality controls, while as an analyst, he acknowledges the power of parental choice to force school officials and teachers to improve the education they provide.

It's a rich perspective, and it's one we think you'll profit from, whether you're reading as a school administrator, a teacher, a parent or a taxpayer.

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About the Author

Angus McBeath is a former superintendent of the Edmonton Public Schools, a superintendent emeritus of Focus on Results and a fellow on public education reform at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies in Nova Scotia.

Issues and Ideas Forum Presentation by Angus McBeath

It's a pleasure to be in Michigan, and it's nice to see that it's stopped raining and that the Detroit kids are back in school.

The story I'm going to tell you is the history of the education reform that we did in Edmonton. I'm not here to suggest anything that you should do in Michigan. That's not my work. I can only describe the work that we did in Edmonton over the last, say, 30 years.

I might just caution you that I don't think Edmonton has anything unique about its staff that caused us to be more inclined to reform ourselves than anyone else. My perception of our district is that at any given point, if it never got better — ever — that would have satisfied many in the system just fine.

Basic Elements of the Edmonton Public School Reforms

A former superintendent in Edmonton looked around the system one day and realized that no matter what happened in our school district, every year the state government would give us more money. You could almost bank on getting more money every year, and we would spend whatever they would send us. And if parents were happy or unhappy, well, that was nice or not nice, but it didn't really matter. So our previous superintendent wondered, What lever could we move — what cog could we turn — that would change behavior? And one of the things that we decided to do about 32 years ago — something that everybody in the central office was horrified by — was that we would let all parents in Edmonton choose whichever building or school they would want their children to go to in the city.

Now just so you all know, Edmonton is a city of about 1.1 million, with a core city surrounded by some suburbs. There are two public school districts occupying the same ground in Edmonton. Kids can go to either system.

So today in Alberta — which is like the state of Michigan: Alberta is a province; Michigan is a state — the money follows the kids. All of the money comes to the school district, and then wherever the child goes to school, the money follows the student. If a student says, "I want to go to a charter school," the money will follow the student to the charter school in total. If a student goes to a private school, two-thirds of the money follows the student to the private school. When we started our effort to try to make the system more responsive to its customers, we opened up all the schools in the system to every kid. Today in 2006, 57 percent of students do not go to their "home school." They will go somewhere in the system, but they will not go to their home school. And we provide subsidized passes on the city's transportation system to make sure kids from ages 5 to 19 can access any school in the system.

To make it even more attractive to attend our system, we have about 35 "programs of choice" dotted throughout the city in multiple locations. I would reckon about 40 percent of Edmonton students attend a "program of choice." A program of choice might be Chinese language and culture. It could be performing arts; it could be science and technology; it could be a form of methodology like project-based learning; it could be a military academy; it could be a hockey school; it could be a school of French immersion; it could be Christian education, Jewish education, Arabic education and culture; it could be whatever parents want, because if we didn't offer it, the parents would collaborate and develop a charter school.

Our goal in Edmonton Public Schools is to make sure there are no private or charter schools. It's the Legislature of Alberta that decided that they would fully fund charters and partially fund private education. The government of the day had almost all the seats, and they decided to fully fund charters and partially fund private schools. The rest of the school districts in the province said, "Let's kill the legislation," and *we* said, "Let's out-compete the private schools and charter schools, so that no one will want to go there." And not only that, there are now virtually no charter or private schools in metro Edmonton. There may be five or six wee little ones. The three mother ships of the private school business in Edmonton all asked to join us.

School Employee Union Involvement

The teachers union was horrified that the three biggest private schools were Christian schools and that they said, "Could we join you?" and we said, "Well, we'll see." The criticism of the teachers union was that we would be connecting church and state.

So my argument was, OK, fine, let's say there are 15,000 kids in Christian education schools right now that don't belong in the public school system. None of those teachers are unionized. None of those teachers make a wage consistent with public school teachers or benefits. None of those teachers are paying fees to the teachers union. If we brought 15,000 kids under our tent and all the teachers that go with them, what would that do to your teachers union? That would swell the ranks of the teachers union by hundreds of teachers.

So the first Christian school came in, and the world didn't end. Two years ago, we brought in the third one. The school board didn't ask a single question the night this superintendent brought a recommendation to the board to adopt the third Christian school, because the world hadn't ended, because our numbers had swelled, because we drained every single Christian education school for a hundred miles around and the kids have done well. And the world as we knew it did not end.

I want to share that with you because we're merciless in our city about competing for kids, and we don't apologize. And we think having a child in a public school is better than having a child in a private school. We think having a child in a public school is better than having a child in a charter school, though we're not against charter schools.

Keeping Schools "On Their Toes"

So how did our schools respond to the fact that kids could move from one school to another? Well, first of all, our central office planning staff said, "How should we reorganize the district if parents have control over where their kids go to school?" But we've now been doing that for 32 years, and so far that hasn't shut the system down. Had you listened to our central office bureaucrats, they would have told you (a) that parents were too uninformed to pick the schools for their children, and that there would be vast dislocations if parents had choice, and (b) that parents would refuse to go to weak schools, and that would be a bad thing, because, How would we keep the weak schools going (*laughter)* if nobody wanted to go to them? That's a true story.

What do we do with the weak schools that parents don't want to send their kids to? Well, I say there are two things: You can make the school better, or you can shut it.

We had a school in Edmonton that was designed for 1,300 kids; there were only 300 left. A thousand parents already closed this school by moving their children to other schools. That hadn't occurred to people.

In Edmonton, the parents are in charge of which schools survive and thrive. So the board did vote to close the school, but in my view, what closed the school was the failure of the school to retain the children either through a lack of good programming or through a lack of good discipline or better teaching. It's not magic keeping a school open in our city: You just have to do a good job.

By the way, parents in Edmonton don't think they have it lucky. It's like having running water to them. My grandparents thought running water was a wonderful thing. If I said to my son, who is 27 years old, "Isn't it wonderful that we have running water?" he would look at me and lock me up. That's not an innovation in 2006. It's not an innovation in Edmonton in 2006 to have school choice. It's just the way we operate. We do not use the word "privatization"; we do not use the word "competition"; we just want to keep our schools on their toes. We do not want to take for granted that these parents trust us with their children's lives and that teachers have the power to transform lives. And why shouldn't parents, who are the most invested people, decide?

Interestingly, if we have a poor school in a poor neighborhood, we will very often locate a program of choice in that neighborhood, so that we have rich kids traveling all across the city right down to the center of the city, where our poorest communities are. We don't put all of our programs of choice in affluent neighborhoods. We very deliberately try to build up older parts of the city by having our performing arts K-12 school, our most famous performing arts school, located right in the city center next to a row of pawn shops. Children come from all over the city and other parts of Alberta and other parts of Canada to attend this school. One of the challenges is whether kids get to live and go to school with kids from other economic neighborhoods. Can you make a law to force them to go to school together, or can you induce them to go to school together because the program is so compelling in that school building?

School-Level Management

Notwithstanding what I said, we did other things to try to make our schools more responsive to teaching young children and doing a good job. One of the things we decided to do back in 1976 (and we've done ever since) was to send 82 cents of every dollar we collect from the state out to the schools and let the schools decide how best to deliver education in their building. They no longer had the argument that somebody downtown makes all the decisions and they were just following orders. The central office used to make all the decisions about what schools got. Now, schools decide how much staff, what kind of textbooks and software, and what kind of teaching strategy, instead of having some supervisor downtown making those decisions.

We piloted that in 1976 with seven schools. Central office said that we couldn't give principals money and authority, because they are either incompetent or immoral and we couldn't trust those guys with the money or with the decision-making. But we said that we trust those people, those men and women, with the children, so let's see what happens.

Well, the pilot was so popular that in 1979, all schools in Edmonton received 80 cents on the dollar. In 1995, we

took the rest of the money out of central office for all of the services and supplies, equipment and products and sent that money to schools.

Even the trades money went to the schools, so that schools could say: "I no longer have to get down on my knees and beg the maintenance department to come paint my building. I now have some money to make that happen. And I'm going to decide based on past performance whether I want to go to our purchasing department and ask for internal forces to paint it or whether I would like to put the thing out for tender and maybe get a better price from a painting company in Edmonton."

That caused some distress in our central office, because that same idea went for a teacher reading-specialist; that went for a teacher psychologist; that went for all of the professional development that teachers access. Everything was going to be decided at the school level.

And the staff in central — and it was my job to do this transition — went through all of the stages of death, dying and grieving. Their conclusion was, "Oh no! No one would ever buy our services." I said, "Why is it that people would access your service when it was free, and they wouldn't be willing to pay for it?" It's no more expensive when it's decentralized than when it's controlled centrally. Well, they had no confidence that schools would buy their services. Anyway, to make a long story short, schools more or less buy from inside the organization, but very often buy from outside the organization, either because they can't get timely service, they can't get quality service or they can't necessarily get the person they believe will do the best job.

One of the things I remember was from a meeting with our tradesman union. They said to me, "Well, if the schools have the money, they won't spend it on maintenance; they'll just lower class size." I said: "Yeah, but we have these maintenance standards at the district level that they have to meet, so the building has to be healthy; it has to be safe; and they can't buy cheap stuff that's below-grade. There are certain specifications that they have to meet." You know, the schools not only spend 100 percent of their trade allocation; they spend about 102 percent to 105 percent of their trade allocation! Schools are spending their money. But that was one of the beliefs.

The schools said to me, "Well, what happens if a plumber comes out, they don't do good work, and the pipes don't work? What would happen in Edmonton Public Schools if you got service that didn't work?" "Well," I said, "there are two choices: (1) Don't pay for it; (2) Make the plumber come back and fix it." That was considered radical in our system.

When everything was free, it was like Poland before the fall of the Berlin Wall: We pretend to work as long as you pretend to pay us. So you might have somebody come out to the school to provide services from central offices. They would come out repeatedly, and the service wouldn't work — so, oh well, we never thought it would; besides, it's free.

When schools got the service money, some services almost died. After-school teacher workshops virtually disappeared. Do you know why? First of all, they were worthless to start with; they didn't change teaching practice; they were free; sometimes only one person would come, and we would spend $400 to $500 to provide a workshop for one teacher. So what the schools started saying is, "If we're going to spend tax dollars that we control and we're spending them outside our classroom for services, we need to have services that work." I didn't think that was an immoral notion, but it was considered radical in our system at first.

The schools tripled their expenditures on technology services. In the first year, we had a cap on technology services when they were centralized. When we gave the schools the money, they tripled it. For years, schools begged us for more social workers, and every year we would try to hold the line on how many free social workers we would provide to the schools. And then they would go to the school board and complain that the administration was hard-hearted because we wouldn't give them, I don't know, 500 social workers. Ironically, they reduced the social workers to six when they had to pay for them, because they realized you can't get social workers from the state for free. Maybe it isn't the work of the schools to provide social work services to kids.

Providing Information to Parents

A lot of people believed that if you introduced the notion of choice to the system, the results would automatically be good, or that you could absolutely count on parents to make wise consumer decisions. Well, I can tell you that parents will send their kids to a bad school sometimes, even though they have a choice to go with another school. So we decided we would have to start a very rigorous system of measuring student achievement — and not just measuring it, but reporting it. And we ran into a lot of objections, with people saying, "First of all, you can't measure anything as complex as learning; second, if you give parents data about school performance, they are too stupid to understand it; and third, people might start choosing their schools based on how well they perform."

But I thought this was a legitimate measure of performance that people might be interested in — whether kids might be learning to read, write, think and compute. We also measure annually parent, staff and student satisfaction with the performance of the system as a whole and with each individual school. Every year our parents, staff and students participate in an anonymous survey by school on everything from their satisfaction and confidence in their principal to their satisfaction and confidence in the safety of their children to the quality of the teaching: Does your teacher help you when you need it? Are the people in the office friendly and accommodating? Do your children get extra help when they need it? Are you satisfied with how demanding the teaching is in this school? Do your children receive enough, too much or sufficient homework? Questions of that nature. All of the results are published annually, and schools set targets to improve the levels of satisfaction in each of these areas every year, or at least key areas every year.

Supporting the Most Important Employees: Teachers

We discovered in our school system — notwithstanding how famous we were — that where we were weakest was in how well our students were learning and how successfully we were graduating our students. In 2000, we discovered that only 63 percent of our kids had graduated from high school, and even though parents had options with charter and private education, we had captured the whole market just about, but we were not graduating enough kids. (And it was only the province that was able to calculate it, because they have a super computer that can calculate movement of kids between and among schools, and they were able to calculate what our graduation rate was.)

So when we found out, the first thing that we decided to do was publish it everywhere in the city. There was great horror about it. How could we, the famous Edmonton Public School system, tell people how badly we were doing? And my position was we need to tell everybody how badly we are doing. So we might lose 10,000 kids. We *deserve* to lose 10,000 kids. I said: "Parents are very forgiving. If we tell them, 'We are not doing a good job,' and we tell them, 'Here are the benchmarks for improvement over the next five years, and here are the plans we have to get better,' chances are they will forgive us." So we put it in our elevators, and we put it on our answering machines; we put it in the newspapers and magazines. If you call the system today, and you are on hold, you'll hear about the history of our graduation rates for the last five, six years. By the way, it's much higher now. People didn't pull their kids out of our system.

Our staff was very unhappy. They thought the statisticians were dead wrong, and we had to explain to them how the data were collected. They agreed eventually that the data were valid. It turned out in our system that we had a ton of data from both the provincial examinations and the district examinations, but it was put in drawers, and nobody used the data to improve teaching, or more importantly, to improve leadership in the schools. So when we gave all that money to our principals, they gladly took it, and it was a lot of fun until we decided that not only do you get the money and the authority, you had to then be accountable for the results. And what are the results? The children learned to read, write, compute, think, behave and learn sciences and that sort of thing, and we needed to measure stuff that was really important.

I realized two things — and I hate to tell you, because it sounds so embarrassing, and it would never happen in Michigan. After I got two degrees, I started teaching grade-six kids in Prince Edward Island, and I did not know how to teach reading very well, because nothing I had learned in college had helped me learn to teach reading. I've taken reading courses, but they still didn't help in how to teach reading.

But it turned out that it didn't matter, because when my principal came in my room, she didn't notice that I couldn't teach reading. I never told her that I didn't know how to teach reading. Nobody else in the school admitted that they didn't know how to teach reading, and in year three, I still didn't know how to teach reading. So I moved to Alberta, which is 3,200 miles away, took a master's degree in administration and then took eight — no, nine — more reading courses, so I thought, Now I have about 12 reading courses. I still didn't know how to teach reading. Of course, there was no plan that anybody who took reading courses would actually learn how to teach it (not in Michigan; I'm talking about Canada). So I started teaching in an Edmonton school. I still didn't know how to teach reading to kids who were hard to teach reading to. My principal didn't notice; it didn't matter.

And I realized, we graduate teachers, but teachers are so unsupported. We graduate teachers from colleges; we certify them; we put them in rooms; we turn the key; and we leave them there 30 years. And then society badmouths teachers for the next 30 years. Have you ever heard people put teachers down? People routinely put teachers down.

If any one of you has a child or has a partner and if that child needed a new heart or that partner needed a new

heart, let me ask you this: Imagine you went over to the nearest hospital, wherever it is, to stand at your loved one's bedside as they awaited an operation for a new heart, and the physician came in and said, "Don't worry, everything is fine." And you said, "May I ask you something, sir (or madam)? I want to know how up-to-date you are on surgical processes and medicines and therapies related to heart procedures." And the response was, "Well, I graduated in 1967, and I haven't read anything since." Would that raise or lower your confidence?

You would be outraged. You would probably refuse to allow that doctor to perform surgery on your loved one.

It may be that bad in Michigan — I have no idea — but certainly in Edmonton, there were teachers like that who in their 30th year of teaching had not learned new teaching strategies, new methodology, new ways of teaching, because it wasn't required of them. So we started a systematic program in Edmonton about six years ago to raise the quality of teaching and leading. Now principals said, "Well, it's not our job to be responsible in Edmonton for the quality of teaching in our rooms." But we said, "You have the money, and you have the authority." They said, "No, no, but we look after all that other stuff" — and I realized the most important people in schools are teachers, because they have the power to transform lives, and only they have the power to take poor children and make sure they have a chance of learning and graduating from high school.

If you don't graduate from high school in Canada, you're doomed. You'll make bottom wages, you'll never get a raise, nobody will give you a promotion, nobody will invest in you, and you'll have a lower health outcome, even in a society that has public medicine. Chances are you'll be unemployed or underemployed and will earn low wages for life, and you will not participate fully as a citizen. That is a documented outcome of not graduating from high school in Canada. Now it may be different here; I doubt it.

So I said to principals: "We have given you the money; we have given you the authority; central office now works in support of you. Now you need to be responsible for the quality of the teaching in the classrooms. And your job is to be in the rooms 50 percent of the instructional day." Now had I said, "Your job is to put a spaceship on the moon in nine years," they would not have received that information with more horror.

But I said: "If you don't have experience being in rooms, why would you go in rooms? You should be in rooms because you need to support teachers, you need to measure them, you need to coax them, you need to observe them, you need to figure out what kind of professional development they need — hopefully professional development that works; that would be novel! — and you need to make sure that you give teachers the kind of feedback that helps them get better at their work." If you were alone with the kids for 30 years, you wouldn't be learning anything from the kids. It's not the child's job to teach you how to be a better teacher.

Now, teaching is the roughest work on the planet. It may be harder to be a soldier in front of the enemy in Iraq, but chances are, we're not going to ask those soldiers to be there for 30 years, at least not the same ones. Whereas teaching is absolutely relentless work — exhausting, discouraging. We don't always give them motivated kids. Oftentimes we ask them to teach kids whose parents are not interested in how well their kids are performing. In order to get better results, you need high-quality teaching, but you also need high-quality leading and building.

We realized that we had to teach teachers how to teach. We couldn't rely exclusively on teacher colleges. The principals needed to be in rooms every day, and we had to train our principals how to do that work. If we didn't know how to do that work, we had to bring in external consultants to help us. We actually had to admit that we did not know how to do that work ourselves.

What have been the results? About 90 percent of our grade-school kids read and write at grade level. We wanted that to be 100 percent. I don't think we should stop working until we hit 100 percent. People tell me that that's impossible. I would respond, "What should the standard be for United Airlines for how many planes take off and land without killing the passengers?" If I phoned them up and they said "80 percent," I'd be flying home on US Airways. I know that United won't admit that their standard is lower than 100 percent, and United may have had an air crash in the last 10 years, of course. But if you say that every kid has got to learn to read and write and think and compute, and you say every United flight has to take off and land without killing the passengers (a reasonable outcome), then chances are that that will change the way you allocate resources, what you measure, how you maintain things, how often you replace the equipment, what kind of professional development the staff needs and what kind of standards you set. So we have had substantial luck in changing our results, but it has been through a level of pressure and support for our teachers and principals to make sure they perform.

Has anybody surrendered? Have we lost a lot of people who don't want to be principals in the system? We have a line of people who are dying to be principals in Edmonton. We have at least a two-year training program just to

get in the door to be a principal and then multiple years of training. If you want to get high-quality results, the people who fix my car shouldn't get more training than the people who are teaching my son. So we have to invest in the right work for improving results and not assume that mere choice is enough to change the system.

Resistance to Reform in Edmonton

Well, I've talked enough. I just wanted to give you a little history of the work we did, though we did more than that, and by the way, it was really hard. Every change I talked about, everybody resisted. Resistance is natural. It was really hard. We had to collaborate with our union. The most senior people in the system had to be reassured, because we were the biggest barriers to reform, and we tended not to want to do any reform work. We said we did, but in reality, we didn't, because it's really hard to change.

It's like going on a diet and exercising, right? Everybody in this room every year pledges we're going to eat better, exercise routinely. It's hard to do that. It's hard to bring about public school reform.

Let me ask you: Is the result worth it? Which children in Michigan would we not want to be successful? Imagine that we brought them in this room. Would we want to sit down with them, maybe telling them when they're 6: "I need to bring you in and talk to you today, Billy, because you're not going to graduate from high school. You're going to lead a life of poverty. We thought we would tell you now instead of letting you find out when you're 20."

Now you wouldn't do that, right? If you brought 6-year-old kids in and told them, "You're done," people would label you as inhumane and cruel. My only added view is that I think it's inhumane and cruel to let them know when they are grown up. It's much harder to rectify those things when a kid is 20 than when a kid is 6.

You've been a wonderful audience. Thank you.

Questions and Answers

On Role of School Boards; Parents' Competence

Question 1: I have two questions, really. First, would you describe your relationship with your school board? And second, don't you put a lot of faith in parents to make the right decision?

McBeath: OK. The school boards back home are elected by the citizens of the city, and they are responsible for the quality of the programs offered by our schools in Edmonton. They have been absolutely instrumental in putting up with superintendents who demanded that we make changes that make our systems more effective. And the board actually set some numerical goals for the districts that are very demanding. They have a public commitment that by the end of next year, 85 percent of Edmonton Public School kids will graduate from high school. They do that kind of thing.

Should we allow parents to make decisions? Well, I don't know, not all parents make good decisions, and my son told me about a year ago that I had done a terrible job of bringing him up to understand the true cost of living. Trust me, I nagged him faithfully for the first 26 years of his life about the cost of electricity, what happens in Canada when you leave the doors open in the winter, shutting off lights, not shoving your foot in your shoe and breaking the back of it — believe me, I nagged him incessantly. He finally moved out into his own apartment, and a year later, he castigates his mother and me, saying that we did a lousy job of teaching him how much it costs to live. Yet God, somehow in his wisdom, allowed me to have that child in my presence. So I know of no better people to raise children than parents. I think even bad parents, as ineffective as they may be, want their children to do well. We trust parents to fill our legislature. They vote for city council; they vote for the legislature; they vote for presidents; they vote for senators; and they vote for congressmen. Parents choose where to live, how they want to live and what vehicles to use. I think most parents make the best decisions they know how.

In Edmonton, parents love the fact they have the power — they have some *purchasing* power — over what happens to their children. Does every parent make a good decision? No. But not every parent made a good decision when the system was centralized with a few bureaucrats downtown, because essentially you say, "Here's your zip code; this is where you go to school." Is that more thoughtful or less thoughtful than a parent actually visiting six high schools and sitting down and talking to the principals and the guidance counselors in six high

schools and observing the results and looking into the classrooms? On the whole, it seems to me that parents will always make better decisions than the state as to what's good for their kids.

On Private Schools

Question 2: You made the comment that basically your mission was to make a public school more successful, even if that meant competing to get the students and allowing Christian and private schools to come in. I'm curious about your argument against those schools.

McBeath: I have no argument against charter schools or private schools, never, ever, ever. My perspective was only: Tell me what you're getting in private education and charter education. What are we not providing you in public education? Would you be willing to come join us if we were comparable or perchance better? But I love charter schools and private schools because they keep us on our toes. In Alberta, if we got rid of the charter schools and private schools, and if you were only allowed to go to a public school, then I think our public schools would relax.

Question 2 continued: You mentioned that 82 cents or 80 cents of the money follows the child?

AM: No, actually, it's 100 percent. All of the money to run Edmonton Public Schools comes from the state, because the state removed the right of the school boards to tax in '94. So 100 percent of the funding comes from the state, and we send 82 cents of every dollar that comes from the state out to the schools, or we give them an 82 cent line of credit.

On the Effect of Open Enrollment

Question 3: One concern that I've always had about absolute free choice on what school to go to is that you get an unintended skewing of your student body, in this sense: Parents who care pick the best schools, and their children are most likely to do well. Parents who don't care leave their children in the remaining schools and don't do well. You've now lost the ability of students to reinforce each other.

McBeath: OK. In systems where there is no choice and the state makes all of the decisions for kids whose parents don't care, are those kids thriving in Michigan?

Question 3 continued: No, they're not.

McBeath: In Edmonton, if you are an underperforming school, you would not be allowed to continue operating that school in an underperforming way. A child should not have to be lucky enough to have a caring parent in order to get a good education.

One of the very poorest schools in Edmonton serves our most high-risk population. In our city, to be high-risk is to be aboriginal, which is Canadian-Indian. They are the children who do the worst. Yet every one of the school's grade sixes two years ago passed the reading test. At the time, I was training some senior executives in our system on how to do a school interview with a principal, and I took them to the most affluent school in the city, and the principal had six kids who didn't pass the grade six reading test. And I said to her, "Those six kids are not going to graduate from high school," because we know that kids who can't read at grade three will not generally finish high school, whether their parents care or don't care. So I said: "You are going to have to go to this other school, absolutely on the other side of the city. I need you to walk into those classrooms working with that principal to learn how to get your results to the same standard as his results."

So parental choice should not influence the quality of the teaching, because you need good teaching in every room for kids whose parents care and for kids whose parents don't care. I don't think parental choice is what should determine quality of schools. We deliberately put our most interesting, innovative programs in our least affluent schools in order to make sure that children in nonaffluent schools are getting innovative, exciting programs. I think choice has the potential to do what you say if there are only islands of goodness in a system and middle-class and upper-middle-class parents generally know how to find those islands. I don't think there can be islands of quality in a school system. It's like water, right? In this city, should only the well-to-do get water that isn't contaminated? Or should I be able to turn on any tap in Lansing and get water that won't kill you?

So I think you should be able to send your child to any teacher in Edmonton and find the teaching is good. That's the only way in my view that you protect children. People think that choice is the whole thing, and I think that choice alone is not enough. I don't think parents can have enough understanding of what goes on in the room to always know, so we have to protect them by making sure there is high-quality teaching in every school. Sorry for the long answer.

On Parochial Schools Joining the Public System

Question 4: I represent the Catholic and nonpublic schools in the state. If I very badly want to be a part of your system, but I cannot have my children educated in a place where they don't have a faith connection to what I believe, may I still come and join you?

McBeath: Yes, you can. We have schools that are all Christian, and we have pockets of Christian programs that exist within a bigger school. We have one school in Edmonton where kids are in the Arabic program and kids are in the Christian program, and then there are kids who are in neither, and the Arabic community is happy, and the Christian element is happy. So if you wanted to come to us and say, "Would you offer a program in this system where my child can learn in a Christian environment and gain knowledge of Scripture and the values that are associated with our belief system?" you could do that within the public schools. Our view is you shouldn't have to pay twice to get one good education.

On Contract Negotiations, Support Services and Small Schools

Question 5: I like what I'm hearing, but what I recognize is that when you have empowered these principals with the privilege of independence, along with that come the accountability and the responsibility which help ensure their success. That's my interpretation of what you have said here today. What I'm looking at, though, are two different aspects that are crucial to that success. One is the negotiating power that the administration would have to work with unions — because the teachers are part of unions, as probably are custodians and others — so that you're not crushing them, but where maybe you go to that union member for a service, and maybe you don't and go outside to someone else based on need. That negotiation sounds critical, and I would be interested to know how that is accomplished.

McBeath: First of all, with our custodian union, you may not use anything but in-house custodians. You may not contract out support staff or teachers. You can only contract out trades and other services. So I don't think in our country, in our province, in our city, we would have been able to contract out cleaning and secretarial support services. And in fact, we did have a pilot program in our system where we contracted out custodial and in-house custodial, and we had the university do an audit of the quality of the contracted-out and the quality of the in-house, and the in-house people won.

Question 5 continued: Well, did I understand, though, that within the contract negotiations phase, I might choose a specialist in a trade or I might choose a consultant who is a union member from anywhere in the system?

McBeath: Yes.

Question 5 continued: Not one that has been assigned to me. So that helps keep that edge up.

McBeath: Now we have reading specialists who are booked up a year in advance. We unfortunately had some reading specialists that nobody wanted. Nobody wanted them before, and nobody wanted them afterwards. Before, they were assigned to you, and you got them whether you wanted them or not.

So I guess if no one wants your service, you have to either do a standard teaching job or you have to be assigned to something else — or maybe you say this work is no longer for me. So there was some barometer-rising with our unions around some of these issues. But it was very hard to argue that we should provide services nobody wants.

Question 5 continued: I just have one other aspect of this, and it has to do with numbers. How many students in your buildings? Did you find that there is a certain number at which it affects your success? Or let's say you have 2,000 or 3,000 students in your building. Is that less successful?

McBeath: Our largest building holds about 2,200, so we would never agree to build anything bigger than that. In fact, we got permission from the state to build a new high school. I think we targeted it at around 1,200. So we would prefer buildings that are smaller, and there are lots of studies on size of buildings. I happen to think that high-quality teaching and leading is more important than the size of the building, and besides, you're stuck with the buildings that the state gave you in the first place, so you have to live with the square footage that you've got and try to do a good job with what you've got. My advice is, Don't build big buildings.

Moderator: That's all we have time for. Thank you very much, Angus.

McBeath: You are very welcome.

Further Resources

On Sept. 14, 2006, radio host Frank Beckmann interviewed Angus McBeath and Mackinac Center Director of Education Policy Ryan S. Olson on WJR-AM Detroit. Beckmann, McBeath and Olson discussed the Edmonton story and how it could apply to Michigan schools. To listen to that interview, go to http://www.mackinac.org/7998.

To listen to a clip from McBeath's presentation to the Issues and Ideas Forum on Sept. 13, 2006, go to http://www.mackinac.org/7928. To read more about the Edmonton story, see "Public Schools Can Provide a Choice to Every Parent" at http://www.mackinac.org/7923.

For coverage of McBeath's visit to Michigan in September 2006, see Michigan Education Report, "Internationally known public school superintendent visits Michigan: 'We decided we'd just out-compete them,'" available on the Web at http://www.educationreport.org/8026.

For information about how McBeath and his organization might consult with a Michigan public school district, contact the Mackinac Center for Public Policy by e-mail at mcpp@mackinac.org or by telephone at 989-631-0900.

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