

Diverse Choices Give Schools Personal Touch – New Families Often Surprised At What Is Offered

The Edmonton Journal - David Howell
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EDMONTON - For families new to Edmonton, choosing schools for their children is as important as selecting a neighbourhood and a home.

But it's not necessarily easier. Choices are plentiful and often mind-boggling.

Will it be the school down the block or one with a special program in another part of the city? Public, Catholic, private or charter? French immersion? Francophone? Half-day kindergarten or full-day?

The city's two largest school districts -- Edmonton Public, with 80,200 students in 199 schools, and Edmonton Catholic, with 32,500 students in 84 schools -- both promote school choice.

They have open boundaries, meaning that while students are designated to the school closest to home, they can choose to attend any other as long as there is adequate space and appropriate programming. Both districts offer a range of specialized programs, from all-girls schools and sports academies to International Baccalaureate. Both also provide special-needs programming for students with disabilities.

"Parents are really pursuing choice," said Lori Nagy, spokeswoman for the Catholic district. "We've definitely seen a change in the past five to 10 years where parents are definitely looking at the choices out there. Parents are very smart to take a look at all of the different options out there and to make sure that what they want for their child, they find."

Shelly Pepler, principal of Meyonohk School in Mill Woods, said her school has welcomed about 50 newcomer students during the current school year. They have come from other parts of Alberta, other provinces and other countries.

"We have families from Scotland and Germany who are looking at us, and that's new to us," Pepler said.

New parents usually have a lot to learn about all the choices offered in Edmonton schools, she added. "Most of them are coming from systems where there is not choice. In almost every instance, the families were not aware of the variety of choices, from languages on, in our city."

Parents who want to learn more about each of the big districts' offerings should start by visiting their websites.

The sites have information about programs, policies, registration procedures, transportation arrangements and school directories with links to individual school websites, which are becoming more popular. On many school sites, parents can read current and past issues of newsletters -- a good way to get a better understanding of the school.

Parents with questions about a particular school can call the principal. Schools welcome visits during teaching hours. Having a tour is a good way for parents and children to learn more about the school's overall feel.

Parents new to Edmonton can ask neighbours, co-workers and others about their experiences with schools their children have attended. What did they like? Were there problems that didn't get fixed?

When it's time to register, parents should make an appointment and visit the school with their child. The school will want to see the child's birth certificate or other proof of age, up-to-date immunization records and a completed registration form.

Alberta Education -- the provincial government ministry responsible for schools - - says students who are entering the Alberta school system from outside the province should submit a previous report card to the school they plan to attend.

Alberta Education also advises parents to ask the new school to arrange for the transfer of their children's previous school records and transcripts.

So they can be placed in the right grade and program, students coming from outside Canada should bring copies of course outlines and content, and information on how their last evaluation was determined, if possible.