

## From Alternative Schools to School Choice in the Vancouver School District, 1960s to the Neoliberal Present

Jason Ellis<sup>a</sup> & Ee-Seul Yoon<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of British Columbia, <sup>b</sup>University of Manitoba

### Abstract

This article examines the transformation over time of alternative secondary school programs in Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). It approaches school choice from a historical standpoint, to make the point that today's choice policies are neither entirely recent nor entirely neoliberal in origin. Instead, they are built on past precedent and policy flowing from the right and left of the spectrum. The article traces the alternative schools that first emerged in the 1960s, and the Vancouver school board's subsequent absorption of them to offer new, alternative programs beyond its regular secondary school curriculum. Vancouver's alternative secondary programs were soon organized into two distinctive types: (1) remedial *rehabilitative* alternatives, and (2) selective *district specified* alternatives. New policy, institutional changes, and philosophical changes in the education sector allowed both types of alternatives to exist, but over time encouraged district specified alternatives to thrive. The provincial School Amendment Act of 2002 represented a watershed for choice as we know it today. It opened attendance boundaries across BC and gave districts the tools to generate their own revenues. Freezing the per-pupil funding it provided to districts at the same time, the provincial government induced districts to compete with one another to recruit students domestically and internationally in order to secure revenue. *District specified* programs in Vancouver became a key to the district's competitive ability. By elucidating some of this history of different alternative and choice programs, at the secondary level in Vancouver, this article adds considerable perspective to the current theoretical discussion about how neoliberal philosophy is changing choice in Canadian schools.

*Keywords:* alternative programs, school choice, education market, educational inequality, neoliberal reforms, policy history

### Introduction

School choice is a topic of considerable interest to academics, policy makers, parents of schoolchildren, students, and the public in general. Families and high school students in Vancouver have more choice today than ever before—arguably as much choice as any of their counterparts anywhere else in the country. How did this come to be? The answer, we contend, lies in the long history of strong alternative programs in Vancouver, that have more recently gestated into twenty-first-century choice programs. In fact, while “choice” is often thought of as a relatively new development in educational policy, its direct antecedents lie nearly five decades in the past in the alternative schools and programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Forman, 2005; Peterson, 1995; Ravitch, 2010).

This article explores the transformation of educational options for secondary school (Grades 8–12) students within the Vancouver School Board (VSB), the public school district of Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). In particular, it examines how a small number of alternative programs originating in 1960s idealism were able to morph into today's broad menu of choice programs with competitive admissions.

While some original alternative programs remain, they are today overshadowed by the newer choice programs. The opening up of alternatives in the secondary schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we argue, created the policy and philosophical space for options; but it was the turn to neoliberal, market-oriented philosophy, in particular after 2002, that has strengthened school choice practices based on competition and student or family self-interest.

By elucidating some of this history of different alternative and choice programs, at the secondary level in Vancouver, this article adds considerable perspective to the current theoretical discussion about how neoliberal philosophy is changing choice in Canadian schools. In this case, by “neoliberal philosophy,” we mean the state’s sustained, systematic use of market policies, including in education (Ball, 2012; Mitchell, 2004). A historical perspective shows, however, that neoliberal educational policies dating from the 2000s rested on a set of earlier policies from the 1960s and 1970s that were not neoliberal at all. A historical perspective also sets choice in the larger context of the administrative and governance, financial, and philosophical changes that public schooling has undergone since about 1970—changes that in their own right form a crucial context and help to explain why contemporary educational policy looks the way it does, with choice playing the significant role that it now does.

### *I. Absorbing Alternatives From Outside the System, Late 1960s–1971*

By the late 1960s, long-before neoliberal choice appeared, alternative schools were flourishing outside the public system. They were not confined to Vancouver, with alternatives popping up in Ottawa, the West Kootenays, and Toronto, among other places in Canada (Bascia, Fine, & Levin, 2017; Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Gorham, 2009; Janovicek, 2012; Nelson, 1973). In Vancouver, there were two basic types of alternative school. One type was for at-risk students who struggled in the traditional public education mainstream. An example is Total Education. Programs such as Total Education, the VSB would eventually name rehabilitative alternatives (Pearmain, 1998). Two youth workers with the Anglican Church in Vancouver who were alarmed by a rapidly increasing drop-out rate in the city’s high schools started Total Education in 1970. Total Education taught these youngsters academically in small groups, and provided considerable counselling to them as well, with the aim of reintegrating them into the schools and society. The youth workers incorporated their school privately under the Societies Act in 1971 on a shoestring budget and used volunteer teachers (Rothstein, 1999).

For the next several years Total Education’s two locations took in a motley collection of dropouts, as well as middle-class misfits, and homeless youth—young people that the public schools were failing to serve effectively. A significant number of students came from high-poverty areas on Vancouver’s east side, and quite a few of the Total Education students who were teenagers were living on their own. Seeing the need for the services Total Education offered to drop-outs in particular, the VSB absorbed the school into the public system a few years after it opened (Rothstein, 1999). Total Education became a public mini school and still operates to this day, housed at Eric Hamber Secondary School (see Table 1).

The other type of alternative was for families who were alienated by mainstream schools, but who were not necessarily economically or socially marginalized. These types of programs the VSB would come to call district specified alternatives. The families that patronized them were, in the vernacular of the day, “turned on” by the counterculture, and by the ideas of progressive and radical educators, and free schools advocates, like Neill, Goodman, Holt, and Kozol (Rothstein, 1999). Closer to home, in Canada, the writings of Bob Davis and Watson Thomson influenced alternative education (Rothstein, 1999). Also influential was *Living and Learning*, the report of Ontario’s Hall-Dennis Committee on the Aims and Objectives of Education, published in 1968 (Bascia, Fine, & Levin, 2017; Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Cole, 2015; Gorham, 2009; Rothstein, 1999). Not all alternative schools were counter-cultural—as Rothstein (1999) and Janovicek (2012) note. Some of the rural ones in particular were influenced instead by the older progressive education and peace movements, or by the religious ideals of groups like the Quakers.

New School was just one Vancouver alternative school started outside the public system in the 1960s. Its Progressive philosophy promoted cooperation over competition (Rothstein, 1999). Alternatives like New School tended to appeal to informed and involved parents looking for a unique experience, or an educational mark of distinction for their offspring (in this respect, these alternatives were not unlike some choice programs today). Rothstein (1999), who studied 1960s alternatives in BC, writes that his “estimations” (he was unable to do a systematic analysis) are that “the great majority” of parents supporting these schools were middle class—as he describes them, “educators, other professionals, small business people,

and creative artists” (p. 13). The VSB did not absorb New School, but the district did spawn district specified alternatives of its own in the 1970s that resembled it fairly closely, including programs at Bayview Elementary School and Charles Dickens Annex (School) (Rothstein, 1999).

Vancouver’s public school system began informally absorbing previously private alternative schools in 1971 (Rothstein, 1999). Private alternative schools in other Canadian cities, facing a high cost of doing business, also tried to get local public systems to annex them. This strategy was successful in Toronto (Bascia, Fine, & Levin, 2017; Nelson, 1973) but failed in Ottawa (Gorham, 1999). In 1974, the VSB made absorbing alternative programs board policy, though not every school was absorbed and some, such as New School, eventually closed (Rothstein, 1999).

## *II. Expanding Alternatives Within the System, 1971–84*

Administrative and governance reforms, some of the most dramatic in more than a generation, were a catalyzing change that made it possible for alternative programs to enter the public system and thrive there after about 1970. In Canada, these diverse reforms, which often have been described as “decentralization” or “community control,” shared a philosophy of making schools more responsive to the demands of pupils, parents, and communities. Through responsiveness reforms, parent councils gained a greater say in school affairs and teachers achieved greater autonomy. New provincial governments and local school boards, often of the New Left or progressive variety—the BC New Democratic Party (BCNDP) government elected provincially in BC in 1972, and the VSB dominated by T.E.A.M. bloc progressive trustees elected that same year—fully sanctioned the reforms. Other scholars describe the full range of changes in detail (Downey, Fleming, & Denley, 1989; Fleming, 2011; Gidney, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

Two particular responsiveness reforms in Vancouver were crucial to the initial viability and subsequent expansion of alternative programs like Total Education in the city’s public school system. The first was the decision by VSB trustees, in 1971, to give parents freedom to choose to transfer their children across boundaries to any school in the system (Vancouver School Board, n.d.b; Vancouver School Board Committee Report, 1971; Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1971). This made it easier for students to attend an alternative program that was not located at their neighborhood or catchment school. The second reform was the conscious decision by district officials to broaden program choices to speak to a wider set of desires for education than public schools had previously recognized. As Dante Lupini, the district superintendent, stated in the district’s 1975–76 *Annual Report*, “The many stimulating and diversified programs outlined in this report are in keeping with the Vancouver School Board’s commitment to meet the needs of its rapidly changing student population.” (Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1976, p. 1; Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1978).

The alternative programs that the Vancouver district absorbed made options a possibility in public schools where this had not previously been the case (Rothstein, 1999). After absorption, alternatives expanded within the Vancouver system. Two distinctive types continued to take shape. Rehabilitative alternatives, like Total Education, held a philosophy of adapting the academic program to create better opportunities for scholastically struggling young people (Rothstein, 1999; Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1975). In the early years, the rehabilitative alternatives dominated the movement within the public system. As early as 1974–75, the Vancouver district boasted a lengthy list of creatively named rehabilitative alternatives (serving the elementary and high schools) that it had absorbed from outside the system, and others that it had started on its own: Total Education, Grandview Rehabilitation Program (aka 7A), 8J–9J Program, Last Chance High (aka Cedar Cottage-Kensington Project), Operation Step-Up, The Bridge, Vinery, OK Program, Strathcona Continuation, Hastings–Sunrise Learning Centre, Riley Park Rehabilitation, Byng Satellite, Kiva–Alma–Tolmie (KAT) class (Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1975).

The second set of VSB alternatives, the district specified alternatives, appealed to families who desired a program that was different, but not rehabilitative. In the late 1960s, New School, for example, had tempted parents who wanted a progressive alternative outside the mainstream system. However, by the 1970s, the VSB’s district specified alternatives were more likely to appeal to families who wanted something unique within the system. These alternative schools, unlike New School, were increasingly more apt

<sup>1</sup>See also Tyack and Hansot (1982) for important background and an American parallel. On these reforms in the VSB see: Vancouver Board of School Trustees (1975); Vancouver Board of School Trustees (1978), and Rothstein (1999).

to emphasize traditional academics as well. One early district specified alternative was Ideal School. The VSB absorbed it in 1974 and it became the board's "academically oriented mini-school" (Rothstein, 1999; Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1975, p. 7). The Point Grey Secondary School Mini School opened in 1979 "in response to an expressed need for such an enriched program" in that community (Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1979, p. 13). Mini schools opened at two additional high schools in the 1970s were reportedly serving the same type of need as well. The BC Quest program (started in 1974) was also a district specified type of alternative. A wilderness program that emphasized field trips, it had a selective admissions policy. "Students selected for the Quest program," the district annual report noted, "must be highly motivated, mature and reliable and must have a medical examination before acceptance" (Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1975, p.7). Although they appeared to serve the same clientele as the progressive alternatives of the late 1960s—mostly highly involved parents who wanted something different for their children, and had the means to get it—the district specified alternatives of the mid-1970s were beginning to have a different feel than these earlier examples. As early as 1976, one Vancouver woman lamented the disappearance of the earliest wave of creative radical alternatives in the face of the new district specified programs, observing that "What is left of the free schools ... has been reduced to a very simple idea. Choice. ... We have moved to the supermarket era." (Audrey Grescoe, as cited in Wilson, 1977, p. 28).

Alternative programs expanded to serve, in targeted ways, other populations in the 1970s and 1980s as well. The VSB started its first alternative program for Indigenous youth in 1976. The "Kumtuks" program (the word means "to teach" in the Chinook language) was rehabilitative. It had an objective of re-integrating into schools twelve- to fifteen-year-old Indigenous students who had been struggling or had dropped out (Allan, 1977; "Natives focus," 1981). By 1981, school officials reported that there were some 1,500 to 2,000 Indigenous children and youth in VSB schools. The district had also set up the Cultural Enrichment Program for them in 1979, with classes at two elementary schools and one high school. Three Indigenous instructors in this program taught Indigenous youngsters "native Indian history, song, dance and art forms" ("Natives focus," 1981, p. 7).

By the early 1980s, Indigenous leaders were requesting "an all-native school" in addition to the alternative programs initiated in the previous decade ("Natives focus," 1981, p. 7). In March 1981, the Native Indian Cultural Survival Society presented a brief entitled "BC Indian Cultural Survival School" to the VSB. It stated two related objectives. One was to achieve a program that would "reflect the varied historical and contemporary cultures of Indian people, and one in which Indian students would be able to learn traditional skills and values as well as those relevant to modern urban life in Canada." The other was "to encourage and develop in students a sense of worth-whileness, increased self-esteem and confidence in their identity as Indian people" (McCreary & Kettle, 1984, pp. 1-2). The all-Indigenous Native Indian Cultural Survival Program (soon renamed Spirit Rising) opened in September 1982 at Britannia High School, near "the city's highest concentration of native Indian families" (McCreary & Kettle, 1984, p. 1; "Native school," 1982). There was some tension between the program's rehabilitative and enrichment goals. An early program evaluation noted that "personnel unanimously felt that until recently the program had been incorrectly perceived as a learning assistance, remediating, or rehabilitation service, whereas its goal has been to provide a culturally enriched academic setting" (McCreary & Kettle, 1984, p. 9). In 1983, the district seemingly responded to this concern by creating a "Screening Committee" to select students for Spirit Rising with the goal of strengthening the program academically (McCreary & Kettle, 1984, p.11)<sup>2</sup>

French Immersion was another type of district specified academic program that arose in this era. The VSB's first French Immersion class was offered at the elementary school level starting in 1972 (Bradbury, 1981).<sup>3</sup> High school level French Immersion debuted in 1980 (Kettle, 1987). The following year, one

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the idea of a separate Indigenous school was itself controversial. Some detractors raised the spectre of the "segregated rural Indian residential school," while others worried that "cultural contact" would be watered down with inauthentic activities. The VSB Chair, Pauline Weinstein, was supportive of a wholly Indigenous alternative school—though she seemed to have a rehabilitative not an enriched program in mind. "If Indian Children—or any other children—don't as a whole succeed in the system, then there's something wrong with the system." ("Natives focus on own school", 1981, p 7).

<sup>3</sup> French Immersion differs from programs for students whose first language is French. In 1978 BC recognized Francophone educational needs by establishing the Programme Cadre. Any school district where 10 parents requested French language services had to establish them (Manzer, 1994). Tony Oldenhof, the VSB modern languages coordinator, who Bradbury quotes, explained the difference between the two programs: "In lay terms, the intent of immersion is to produce and Anglophone who can function in French. The purpose of *Cadre* is to produce a Francophone" (Bradbury, 1981, p. 5).

commentator would describe French Immersion as the “fastest growing and most successful educational experiment in Vancouver in a decade,” though most of that growth was still in elementary schools (Bradbury, 1981, p. 4). In 1983 a second high school French Immersion program opened, and by 1986 a combined approximately 270 pupils were enrolled in the program at the high school level district-wide (Kettle, 1987).

French Immersion had an indisputably elite feel that was in line with the district specified alternatives of the late 1970s and 1980s. A 1987 study of secondary school French Immersion in Vancouver distributed questionnaires that were answered by several hundred people involved with the program (Kettle, 1987). Answering were French Immersion students, their parents, their teachers, and other teachers and administrators at their schools who were not directly involved with the program. Students and parents reported most often that they had chosen French Immersion because the program made students fluent in the language. The most frequently named benefit of fluency was that it widened job opportunities. However, the study also concluded that “reputation”—both of the program and its schools—“were strong factors” in choosing French Immersion. Teachers who were not involved in French Immersion instruction agreed with the statement that the program was a “benefit” to their school, by a margin of about five-to-one over those who did not agree (Kettle, 1987, p. 43). However, among teachers who had negative things to say about French Immersion, the greatest number of their responses referred to “elitist attitudes” of the students and their tendency “to form cliques.” (Kettle, 1987, p. 52). Indeed, a decade prior to this study, one researcher conducting a program evaluation of the elementary *École Bilingue* also remarked “it’s difficult to know if parents now select the school because of its general elite characteristics or its specific French immersion curriculum.” (Wolsk, 1977, p. 19).

Despite the displacement of the progressive, radical, or free school district alternatives by mini schools, the Quest Program, and French Immersion—the sort of development that the one woman commenting on supermarket schools in 1976 lamented—it was also the case that the majority of alternatives available in the Vancouver district in the 1970s to early 1980s were still of the rehabilitative type. Widespread school choice, of the variety that is familiar to us today, still lay over the horizon. In 1976, for instance, 15 of 18 VSB alternatives were rehabilitative, not district specified (Vancouver Board of School Trustees, 1976). More rehabilitative programs would be added in the early 1980s. In 1982, the district opened a mini school to help “teenage mothers” finish high school (Vancouver School Board, 1984, p.7). The SPECTRUM program that also opened in 1982 had the rehabilitative goal of bringing dropping out youth back to high school to complete grades 11 and 12 (Hunter, 1985).

Another sign that school choice, as we know it today, had yet to take serious root was that in the 1970s, a large majority of VSB students attended their catchment school. Few opted to transfer from it for program reasons, even though the open boundaries policy the VSB passed in 1971 permitted them to do so completely freely if space was available in the school they wished to transfer to. A 1977 planning study noted, without providing a specific figure, that “at present very few Vancouver elementary school children travel more than eight blocks to school.” (Vancouver School Board: Planning and Administrative Services, 1977, p. 59). In 1980, three researchers looked at reasons VSB students transferred from one high school to another. They surveyed two groups: students and parents. Neither’s answers reflected strong desire to choose programs for academic reasons. The top reason students named for transferring to a school was to be with friends. The top reason both groups named for transferring from a school was a family move to a new dwelling (Hunter, Stevens, & Kettle, 1980). By the mid-1980s, however, the tide in the VSB would begin to turn away from rehabilitative programs and towards the district specified programs. With that turning tide more students would cross boundaries than before.

But before that, BC families would in a way obtain more access to options in 1977 when the provincial government enacted a new policy on public money for private schools. A lobby called the Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA) was successful in its long bid to have the Catholic, elite, and Christian evangelical private schools that it represented receive public funds. These schools, if they could meet certain basic conditions, became eligible for a government grant worth up to 30% of the cost of providing education to public school students in the district where the private school was located. (Later the government would increase this to up to 50%)<sup>4</sup> (Barman, 1991). However, this policy did not appear

<sup>4</sup>Arguably the policy’s net effect was to bring BC into line with what several other provinces had been doing since the nineteenth century. In several Canadian provinces, Roman Catholic “separate schools” have always received some type of funding (Barman, 1991).

to have any immediate effect on program choice within the public school system.

### III. *The Rise of Elite District Specified Programs and Choice, 1984–1996*

By the mid-1980s more and more of the new alternative programs that the VSB was adding were aimed at academically successful and striving children and youth who wanted to improve their positions even further. The tide that had turned away from the progressive or radical alternatives schools of the late 1960s was now receding even further, leaving the rehabilitative alternatives behind as well. One strongly academic oriented alternative program that the VSB added in this period, in 1984, was the International Baccalaureate (IB) (Kettle, 1986). Two researchers who reviewed IB for the board in 1986 described it as “rigorously providing an enriched program for academically gifted students.” (Kettle, 1986, p. 4; Vancouver School Board, 1984). More than two thirds of enrollees came from outside the catchment area of the one VSB high school that offered IB (Kettle, 1986). In 1990 the VSB opened a second IB stream at another high school (Vancouver School Board, 1991).

IB had demanding academic admission requirements. Students had to sit the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (Senior Level). A steering committee evaluated all applicants, but selected only some for an entrance interview (Kettle, 1986). It used admissions criteria that included requiring an applicant to have at a minimum a B-minus average. (Exceptions were made for “bright students” who were “disenchanted with school”) (Kettle, 1986, p. 35). Other criteria emphasized aptitude in English, or in language generally if English was not the student’s mother tongue; good social skills and a record of positive school behaviour; at least one extracurricular activity; “international interests”; and an ability to make connections between subject matter in different curriculum areas (Kettle, 1986, p. 35). One hundred students applied to the program in its first year. Twenty-seven were admitted to the full diploma. Another 43 entered a Grade 10 pre-IB program. A larger group was allowed to take IB courses but these students were not admitted to the full diploma stream (Vancouver School Board, 1984).

Surveyed on why they had enrolled, students in the IB program in 1986 responded most frequently with “desire for academic stimulation and the opportunity to learn more” (Kettle, 1986, p. 13). They also named—as did their parents—the competitive advantages that IB supposedly brought, such as “broadening their options for future education and providing better preparation for university” (Kettle, 1986, 13) (see also, “Challenging program,” 1984). The IB program’s selectivity in its own right was a draw. More than one in 10 respondents stated that an “advantage” was “the opportunity to belong to a high status group or to enjoy the rapport of like-minded students” (Kettle, 1986, p. 18). The sort of exclusive choice IB became permitted students enrolling in it to acquire a higher educational status and credentials through their choice of this program. The program’s status made it more attractive to families who sought exclusivity for its own sake, pushing up demand that made the program all the more exclusive and attractive to a segment of families.

The radical or progressive alternative programs of the late 1960s had tapped into the spirit of their times. So did the district specified programs of the mid-1980s that focused on academic excellence and enrichment (Ungerleider, 2003).<sup>5</sup> The times had changed. Different-sounding rumblings of discontent with schools came as early as the mid-1970s in BC (Wilson, 1977). By the 1980s, across Canada a significant number of parents, and wide segments of the public, had grown increasingly dissatisfied with public schooling. The frequent complaint was that academic standards were too low. Another charge was that schools seemed to cost taxpayers more and more every year, even as quality appeared to decline (Fleming, 2011; Gidney, 1999). Individually parents worried that poor quality schooling would hurt their child’s chances for success in a competitive world (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Ungerleider, 2003). As R.D. Gidney (1999) and Charles Ungerleider (2003) both argue, American notions about public school decline and reform, such as those contained in the 1983 watershed *A Nation at Risk* report in that country, had a disproportionately large impact on Canadian public opinion in these years.<sup>6</sup>

Governments in the 1980s enacted policies designed to counter public concern. Spending controls and supposedly tougher curriculum standards were two reform strands. To control upwardly spiralling costs in education (and other sectors), the BC Social Credit government of Bill Bennett announced the *Public Service Restraint Act* and *Education Interim Finance Act* in 1982 (Fleming, 2011). Restraint’s effects on

<sup>5</sup> Barman (1991) argues as well that “the stagnation of [private therapeutic] alternative school enrolments...was likely a consequence of general conservatism in social values in the 1980s.” (p. 21).

<sup>6</sup> On *A Nation at Risk*, its content and impact, see Ravitch (1995).

VSB alternative programs were negligible. A review of restraint's consequences at the VSB contains no evidence that cutbacks closed any alternative programs. Instead cuts fell mainly on English-as-a-second-language services, special education classes, guidance, and teacher aides (Latorre, 1985).<sup>7</sup> In 1984, in a bid to raise academic standards to counter the public's feeling that they had declined, Bennett's government reintroduced standard Grade 12 Provincial Examinations in 13 subjects (Glegg & Fleming, 2004).

Like the Social Credit BC governments in the 1980s did with public services more generally, some reformers in the 1980s and early 1990s pushed the introduction of a market system as education's saviour. This strand of reform thrust program choice to the forefront of policy, as these reformers argued that allowing parents to choose would improve schools by making them more efficient and higher-achieving. Both vouchers and charters found more limited appeal in Canada than in the United States, though a choice movement of sorts did take shape in this country (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Osborne, 1999; Ungerleider, 2003). A 1988 BC Royal Commission on Education (the Sullivan Commission for its head, Barry M. Sullivan) that the Social Credit government launched came out strongly for choice as a policy aim for the province's public school system (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988). The discussion in Sullivan's report reflected a dramatic change in the language used to describe program options. School reformers in the late 1960s and early 1970s had used the term "alternatives," to emphasize that these programs departed from establishment norms. Demonstrating the shift in social and educational values underway by the late 1980s, Sullivan referred not to alternatives to the mainstream, but to individualistic choice to maximize chances within it (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988). Parents, Sullivan emphasized, believed they possessed "a fundamental democratic right" to choose a school program "in accordance with their own philosophical beliefs and values" (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988, p. 11). He even presented this choice as the way to achieve equity—"a means of recognizing individual differences among youngsters" (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988, p. 11). Further indicative of a values shift, Sullivan referred to "equality" as merely an "ideal," while choice was a "right" (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988, pp. 11-12). Choice appears in the commission's final recommendations. Sullivan recommended

a "loose" and "tight" system. ... "Loose" in the sense that greater differentiation, greater choice, greater diversity, and greater freedoms exist for all individuals within the system than at present; "tight" in the sense that there is closer articulation and cooperation among the components of the system. (BC Royal Commission on Education, 1988, p. 219; Crawley, 1995)

(that is, greater accountability and more stable funding).

Yet, as late as the 1980s and early 1990s school choice had still not become a policy associated purely with neoliberalism (Apple, 1982; Ellis, 2012; Katz, 1987; Ravitch, 2010). The BC NDP, a left-leaning social democratic party and the province's official opposition, supported the province's 1989 *Independent Schools Act* legislation. The BC NDP "committed itself to maintaining financial support for non-public schooling" (Barman, 1991, p. 25). The party's education critic, Anita Hagen, stated in the legislature "we agree with the government that choice and alternatives should be the hallmark of an educational system" (as cited in Barman, 1991, p. 25). The BC NDP's stated preference was for choice within the public system, over funding for independent schools (Barman, 1991). In government from 1991 to 2001 (and with Hagen as Minister of Education from 1991 to 1993), however, the BC NDP did not move to curtail choice or public funding for private schools (London, 2005). The party aborted on its one attempt to prevent independent schools from taking provincial funds for class size reductions when this move met stiff opposition from the independent schools' association and from 23,000 copies of a form letter citizens mailed to the government (Ungerleider, 2003).

Nor for that matter were parents who backed choice in the 1980s or early 1990s necessarily motivated by neoliberal ideology. Historically, in Canada, parents chose schools for religious reasons, or chose for their children to attend a school that taught the family's minority language and culture. Ideological alignment with the neoliberal idea that choice creates helpful competition, while also producing comparative advantages to the students who choose, was only sometimes a parental motivation for supporting choice policy (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2016; Ungerleider, 2003). In fact, with broad support, choice had a more mainstream appearance in educational policy in the 1980s and early 1990s in BC, and elsewhere. This may have in fact made it easier for reformers to intensify choice policy greatly in the decades that followed.

<sup>7</sup>Latorre (1985) reported that a total of approximately 160 teaching positions were lost. But this represented just 5.6% of a total teaching force of 2,850. At the same time, enrolment declined, though by a smaller figure (1.3%).

#### *IV. Choice at the Crossroads of Major Change, 1996–2002*

The growing popularity of district specified type programs in Vancouver by the mid-1990s was having a discernible impact on regular public school programs. Meanwhile, rehabilitative alternatives were falling behind. In 1996 VSB trustees asked senior management to review secondary school choice and alternative programs in light of a large number of requests for the board to develop even more options (Pearmain, 1998). By this time the VSB had a “high performance athletics” program and a program for elite youth performing arts students, as well as a “challenge” acceleration program that squeezed three years of high school material into two (Vancouver School Board, 1998). Parents in the 1990s also requested and received new Mandarin language immersion classes at the elementary level. A review was deemed necessary to determine if this program could be extended to the secondary schools. Punjabi and other language immersion programs were under consideration as well. French Immersion was recommended for a further expansion at the elementary level that would support retaining a greater number of students into the high school years and thus potentially expanding the program there as well (Pearmain, 1998).

Bob Pearmain (1998) prepared the senior management review of alternatives that the VSB trustees asked for. A significant problem he identified was choice programs that by the late 1990s were pulling too many students away from their catchment secondary schools. In Vancouver, as we have noted, cross-boundary transfers were permitted starting in 1971. But they do not appear to have been common at first and their effects on local programs do not appear to have been a concern. By the 1980s there was some evidence that larger numbers of students were transferring to access programs such as IB. When Pearmain reported in 1998, transfers had become significant. Twelve of 18 VSB secondary schools had district specified programs. Parents perceived these “as superior to the regular programs offered in large mainstream schools” (Pearmain, 1998, p. 5). This essentially drained students from the six remaining Vancouver high schools that did not have district specified programs. Since schools on the city’s affluent west side were more likely to have district specified programs, transfers to access them skimmed away the best pupils from schools on the poorer east side. As a solution, Pearmain recommended at least one district specified alternative program in every high school, to mitigate pupil flight from the schools that did not yet have them. He also recommended the VSB cap the proportion of out-of-catchment students at new and existing district specified programs. In effect, this was a proposal to revisit the 1971 change to open boundaries that had set alternative program expansion in motion in the first place. However, Pearmain discovered that the political price of altering district specified alternatives was high. Teachers, other staff, parents, and the community were distrustful of the VSB’s motives for even reviewing district alternatives at all. Eventually a petition against aspects of Pearmain’s report would garner nearly 900 signatures (Vancouver School Board, 1999).

Pearmain (1998) also identified sizeable difficulties with rehabilitative alternatives. A significant problem was “a sense of drift” in the Grade 9 and 10 programs especially (Pearmain, 1998, p. 11). Rehabilitative alternatives had once been the backbone of the VSB’s optional programs. By the time of Pearmain’s report, their goals were often no longer clear and the programs did not receive adequate oversight. Because programs were disorganized, some students who began in a rehabilitative alternative in high school eventually had to return to the regular program, where they inevitably struggled. A few “off campus” rehabilitative programs were in dilapidated facilities (Pearmain, 1998, p. 12). The scholastic side of rehabilitative alternatives also needed strengthening (Pearmain, 1998). The district did not promote its rehabilitative alternatives the same way it did its district specified ones. The latter had a brochure, *Options ’98* (Pearmain, 1998). The rehabilitative alternatives should have one as well, Pearmain advised. He even recommended changing the language of rehabilitative to “a less labeling term” because it had become pejorative (Pearmain, 1998, p.10).

#### *V. The Provincial Context of Market-Based Educational Reforms Since 2002*

If Pearmain’s 1998 report pumped the brakes on alternative and choice programs, the market-oriented approach to the public sector that the new BC Liberal government introduced after it was elected in 2001, stepped on the gas. The BC Liberals inherited a pool of centre-right voters that had belonged to the Social Credit Party for most of the second half of the twentieth century. The new BC Liberal approach to public policy was notable for injecting a market logic into the Vancouver school district, particularly its alternative programs. Following the party’s campaign platform, *A New Era for British Columbia*, the Liberal



government pursued a strong privatization plan across the public sector (Lacharite & Summerville, 2017). It included corporate tax and individual income tax reductions, increased public-private partnerships (P3s), and privatization of the Crown corporation BC Hydro (Lacharite & Summerville, 2017). In the area of education, the government passed Bill 34, the School Amendment Act, in 2002 (Poole & Fallon, 2015). The act changed the structure of schooling in BC by setting up province-wide school choice, to take effect in the 2003–04 school year. The act enabled school choice across the province, allowing students to enrol in any school, in any district of their parents' choice, provided there was space available. This replicated the open boundaries VSB schools had enjoyed since 1971, but on a provincially universal scale. In introducing the new legislation, Christy Clark, BC's Minister of Education, gave the following rationale:

We want to create a top-notch public education system for young people in British Columbia: a system that recognizes the importance of parental involvement and gives parents a more meaningful voice in how our schools are run, a system that gives students more choice about the school they attend and the educational program they follow, a system that provides school boards with greater financial flexibility and enables them to become more entrepreneurial and, above all, a system that's focused at every level on improving student performance. (Clark, 2002, p. 1505)

Bill 34 was accompanied by the constraint of the provincial government freezing the amount of money it contributed to districts for K-12 schools over three consecutive fiscal years (Fallon & Paquette, 2008). This is significant because, since the 1990s, the provincial government in BC has had the near-exclusive power to set the local school tax rate and to dictate a ceiling on school district expenditures (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2017; Fleming, 2011; School Act, 1996). Districts could not simply increase taxes on local residents to make up for the provincial spending freeze. Bill 34 was intended to channel their response to funding shortfalls in other directions instead (Fallon & Paquette, 2008). One of the very few options available to them was to compete with other districts for students and the funding dollars that followed them. The ability to attract students from outside the district, which Bill 34 (2002) created when it lifted school boundaries and allowed inter-district transfer, meant that if a district could attract students from other districts through specialized alternative programs, provincial funding that was tied to pupils would follow students to the school districts they chose to attend. Public school districts would compete with each other to find ways to make their offerings more attractive, introducing school choice programs (Yoon, 2013).

What is more, freezing provincial contributions to districts motivated school boards to become entrepreneurial and to use additional new tools the province had created for them to find private sources of revenue through the establishment of for-profit activities. Bill 34 (2002) permitted school districts to form business companies for the first time. Districts establish these and use them to operate various revenue-generating enterprises, such as off-shore schools, that they own abroad. A much more significant revenue-source, however, was districts charging high international student tuition fees for overseas students to come to BC to attend public high schools in the province (Poole & Fallon, 2015). BC districts participating in private initiatives in 2011–12, including Vancouver, generated \$190 million for their efforts. Vancouver's take, some \$23 million, was the largest, though not highest per capita. Though the sums make up only a slender portion of operating funds (2.7% of the province-wide total and 4.8% of the Vancouver district total), these amounts running into the multi-millions are surely noteworthy when they are practically the only other additional revenue source school boards have besides provincial grants (Poole & Fallon, 2015).

At the same time as these changes were underway in the public school districts, provincial government subsidies for independent and private schools were increasing. These subsidies are tied directly to enrolment and increased because the number of students attending those schools was rising as well.<sup>8</sup> Private schools are a growing part of the competitive marketplace mix. In gearing up to compete to attract public students from other districts, to secure private revenues and bring in international fee-paying students, and to ward off the challenge of publicly funded private schools, the VSB's specialized programs, especially district specified programs, such as IB, became an important tool. This was happening,

<sup>8</sup> Under BC's Independent School Act (1996), so-called Group 1 and Group 2 independent schools get, for every one of their pupils, 50% (Group 1) and 35% (Group 2) of the per pupil operating grants that the public school districts in which the independent school is located receives. Grants to Independent Schools. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/grants-to-independent-schools>

moreover, as Vancouver became an aspiring global city with a high influx of professional middle-class families from all over the world (Yoon, 2011).

## *VI. The Rise of District Specified Alternative Programs in Vancouver and Decline of Rehabilitative Alternative Programs, 2003–2015*

Alongside the BC Liberal government's efforts to expand school choice and competition among the province's districts and private schools, Vancouver's district specified alternative programs expanded in the 2000s and 2010s. The district encouraged parents to choose, saying:

Before you enrol your child, explore the available options that may suit your child's needs.... For students in K–12 there are programs such as Montessori, French immersion, Mandarin bilingual, mini-schools, fine and performing arts programs, sports academies, career programs, gifted enrichment education, and an outdoor school, to name just a few options. Our district programs are designed to provide innovative learning experiences for students both inside and outside of the classroom. (Vancouver School Board, 2012a)

The district also facilitated choosing district specified alternatives through its regular publication of the *Options* brochure (Vancouver School Board, 2009, 2013). Grade 7 teachers distributed the brochure to their students, who would begin high school the following year, to take home as a sort of school shopping catalogue.<sup>9</sup> It presented different options that students and parents could choose from. *Options* documents over 20 programs (Yoon, 2013). Most are designated mini schools, which offer accelerated teaching of the provincial curriculum (enabling earlier graduation, if desired) while others enrich that curriculum by delving into the subject matter in greater depth and by the means of multidisciplinary learning. *Options* supplies information about the IB program, French Immersion, and the arts and sports academies that admit students capable of performing artistically or competing athletically at national and international levels (see Table 1).

Today's newest district specified alternatives are a far cry from the rehabilitative alternatives that dominated in the 1970s, like Total Education. It was for drop-outs, homeless youth, and middle-class kids who did not fit in. District specified alternatives today are for high-achievers who tick all the success boxes. As described in *Options* (Vancouver School Board, 2009), Britannia Hockey Academy is a licensed Hockey Canada Skills Academy (HCSA). Students have access to the HCSA-certified instructors and personal trainers while they complete their regular high school studies. Ideal Mini School is a small school that accepts only 30 students in Grade 8, and has its own separate "campus." The district promotes it for students who are ready for an academically rich interdisciplinary curriculum where discussion and critical thinking are emphasized. The John Oliver Technology Immersion Mini School program focuses on information technology, media, and web-based learning in a wireless classroom. Prince of Wales Mini School offers enriched courses beyond the regular curriculum. The school, while seeking students with a high level of academic achievement, also aims to develop their leadership skills.

Descriptions of mini schools in *Options* indicate that schools are trying to stand out in order to "compete" with one another (Olson Beal & Beal, 2016). All of these programs have also come to focus explicitly on better preparing students for post-secondary education. *Options* notes "These programs have been developed for students who have demonstrated significantly high potential, talent and need for a challenging program in preparation for their post-secondary education" (Vancouver School Board, 2009, p. 4). Programs in *Options* are thus packaged as more competitive than regular secondary schools. In contrast, notably absent from *Options* are the rehabilitative alternative programs. Information on them is not as easily available. In other words, rehabilitative programs are not promoted as part of choice, but rather have remained as a form of institutional support for struggling students on the recommendation of teachers or counsellors (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017).

The way that the district presents the programs in *Options* plays on the notion of scarcity. Many students compete for a few spots, and only the best are selected. In all of the district specified programs, many more students apply than there are available places. Students are chosen using extensive criteria set by both the district and each school (Vancouver School Board, 2013). The Vancouver district is unique in Canada in obliging all students that apply for district specified programs to take a district test in English

<sup>9</sup>In Vancouver and in many other places in BC, high school begins in Grade 8, unlike in most Canadian provinces where it begins in Grade 9.

Table 1

Trends of VSB Alternative Programs (2002-15)

	District specified alternative programs			Rehabilitative alternate programs		
	2002	2010	2015	2002	2010	2015
	<i>24 options</i>	<i>29 options</i>	<i>27 options</i>	<i>35 options</i>	<i>27 options</i>	<i>15 options</i>
Britannia	IB Venture	IB Venture Hockey Academy	IB Venture Hockey Academy	8J9J Street Front Outreach Aries Phoenix Youth Response	8J9J Street Front Outreach Aries Cedar Walk	8J9J Street Front Outreach
Churchill	FI Ideal IB	FI Ideal IB Synergy	FI Ideal IB			
David Thompson	Odyssey	Odyssey	Odyssey			
Gladstone	Montessori Mini	Montessori Mini	Mini	East Side STTEP	East Side	
Hamber	Challenge	Challenge	Challenge	Total	Total	Total
John Oliver	Mini	Mini	Mini	Bridge West Take a Hike	EPIC West Take a Hike	Take a Hike
Killarney	Mini	Mini	Mini			Spectrum Foundation West
King George	City School Tech Immersion	City School Tech Immersion	City School Tech Immersion IB	Focus	Computer	Computer
Kitsilano	FI	FI	FI	Vinery Genesis Avalon Pacific	Vinery Genesis	Vinery
Lord Byng	Arts	Arts	Arts	Satellite	Satellite	
Magee	SpArts	SpArts	SpArts			
Point Grey	Mini	Mini	Mini	Sty-wet-tan	Sty-wet-tan	Sty-wet-tan
Prince of Wales	Mini Trek	Mini Trek	Mini Trek	Bridge		
Templeton	Mini	Mini	Mini	Bridge	Peak House	East Side

				Step-Up Middle Peak House Genesis	Genesis Pinnacle West Coast	Sunrise East
Tupper		Mini	Mini	Bridge Riley Park Young Parent	Alternate Genesis Young Parent	Alternate Young Parent
U-Hill	Transition	Transition	Transition			
Vancouver Tech	FI Summit Trek	FI Summit Flex	FI Summit Flex	Sunrise East Spectrum Tumanos	Sunrise East Spectrum Tumanos	
Windermere		Leadership Athena Arts	Leadership	Foundation Eagle High Genesis Southtown	Foundation Eagle High	

Note: This table uses program information from VSB Ready Reference documents from 2001-02, 2010-11, and 2014-15. Some program names have been abridged for the purpose of making information more presentable. FI refers to French Immersion; IB to International Baccalarureate; Hockey to Ice Hockey Academy; Total to Total Education; Youth Response to Specialized Youth Response Program; Alternate to Tupper Alternate; and Sty-wet-tan to Sty-wet-tan First Nations Program.

and mathematics, and cognitive tests. Also, all students who apply to these programs must submit their report card from the previous grade (with grade point average), recommendation letters, and portfolios. In addition, most schools require individual or group interviews with prospective students. District specified programs thus provide more options to students who perform well on tests or in courses, or who have high aspirations—and they are admitted to programs they choose on a competitive basis. Indeed, as the VSB website states on its “Mini Schools Frequently Asked Questions” page, “The Mini School programs are for students who will be comfortable rather than stressed with academic challenges” (Vancouver School Board, n.d.a, para. 7).

French Immersion has retained the elite feel it first picked up in the late 1970s. Parents in one 2010 study report choosing French Immersion because their children receive the chance to learn this official language of Canada (Yoon & Gulson, 2010). But in addition, they say they chose French Immersion because their children will be placed in a classroom with fewer “needy” (as they call them) children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) designations, special education or other needs, and behavioural problems (Yoon & Gulson, 2010). French Immersion tends to separate out more children with middle-class backgrounds and from Anglophone families (Nichols, 2016; Willms, 2008). At the secondary school level in Vancouver, it selects only those who followed French Immersion in the elementary grades and, in the case of the Kitsilano Secondary French Immersion program (at least), who have sat a test of French language proficiency (see <https://www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/french-immersion-grade-8-12>). The total count in Vancouver secondary school French Immersion programs in 2011–12 was 1,128 (about 4% of the total secondary student population) (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2012).

The rise of district specified choice programs that give the impression of providing a competitive edge to selected students, while encouraging schools to compete also, has generated some elitism and has led to forms of streaming. Students who are enrolled in mini schools come to internalize a sense of being an elite group because they reach the “high” status of the district specified alternative programs (Yoon, 2016). Meanwhile, students who are not in the district specified programs experience feelings that they are not as smart and that they are not going to be as successful in school and on the job market (Yoon, 2017). Concentrating students with high needs, such as students who need EAL support, in a smaller number of classrooms is a consequence of district specified choice programs that cream off high-achieving students (Yoon, Lubienski, & Lee, 2018). Another consequence is the sorting of Vancouver students by income. Although low-income families choose schools (of any sort) that are outside their catchment with a frequency that is comparable to higher-income families, they are far less likely to enrol their children in district specified alternative programs (Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). In other words, students with the greatest family resources are more likely participants in the premium district specified programs that seem to offer the biggest payback.

In Vancouver today, more students are competing and more families are choosing than in the past, if mini school enrolment figures and student transfer statistics are any indication. The number of students enrolled in district specified alternatives has increased since the 2000s. In 2006, about 600 students were enrolled in mini schools (Hadley, 2007). By 2012–13, this number had risen to 2,716 (about 10% of the total secondary school student population) (Vancouver School Board, 2012b). Overall, the number of students attending secondary schools outside the student’s catchment reached approximately 8,810 – 34% of the entire secondary student population in the 2011–12 academic year (Vancouver School Board, 2012b). By contrast, in 1980, as we earlier said, it was reported that very few high school students transferred schools under the open boundaries policy that had then been in effect for nearly a decade.

Table 1 also confirms the shifting trend towards district specified and away from rehabilitative alternative programs in 18 Vancouver secondary schools from 2002 to 2015. After 2002, and the changes to provincial policy, district specified programs expanded. More recently they have levelled off. However, rehabilitative alternative programs shrank—from 35 in 2002, to just 15 in 2015. As we have said, in 1976, 15 out of 18 VSB alternatives were rehabilitative. In other words, rehabilitative programs made up 83% of alternatives then; district specified alternative programs accounted for just 17%. By 2015, rehabilitative programs accounted for 35% of alternatives only.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, two different types of alternative to mainstream high schools took shape outside of Vancouver's public school system, and were subsequently absorbed by that system. Rehabilitative alternatives were for youth that the VSB's existing high schools served poorly, such as drop-outs. There were also district specified alternatives, which were not for youth who were necessarily at-risk, but rather for the ones whose parents wanted a radical or progressive alternative to the traditional, mainstream schools. In the 1970s and 1980s, district specified alternatives morphed, losing most of their earlier counter-cultural features. They re-emerged as options for high-achieving youth or for those looking for an academic niche. The 1970s to mid-1980s saw the VSB add new choices, such as French Immersion and IB. Rehabilitative alternatives, however, continued to exist and even to outnumber district specified ones. In the mid-1980s, the number and profile of district specified alternatives began to rival the rehabilitative offerings. By the 1990s, district specified alternatives had overtaken them. In the 2000s, especially after 2002, they would add to their lead considerably.

Educational policy and social changes fuelled this transformation over time. Interest in alternatives to mainstream schooling became popular in the 1960s during a time of cultural upheaval. The VSB made an opening for choice in the 1970s, as the district tried to make its schools more responsive to familial and youth needs and desires. The open boundaries policy the VSB adopted in 1971 created the precedent early of choosing a school that was not in one's immediate neighbourhood. When the district absorbed private alternative schools, in the 1970s as well, it further cultivated a tradition of options in Vancouver. These policies were not at that time envisioned as nurturing neoliberalism. However, the idealism of the 1960s that produced rehabilitative alternatives weakened in the 1970s, and by the 1980s had given way to the popular view that schools were underperforming and over-expensive. Education policy reformers who promoted higher standards and lower costs found a willing audience that included many parents of children in the schools. The 1988 report of BC's Sullivan Royal Commission captured the new ethos and its connection to more parents choosing the educational program they felt was to their child's greatest advantage. The Sullivan Commission presented school choice as a parent's right. However, choice had still yet to become a matter of creating competition between schools or districts.

After 2002, that would change. A new wave of market-oriented neoliberal policies enacted and provoked several changes. First, Bill 34 created a strong incentive for public school districts to compete with one another by differentiating programs. It gave them the tools to compete (open boundaries, private revenue sources) at the same time the province froze education funding. Second, more Vancouver families did make school choices in the 2000s and 2010s. Third, the reasons behind families' choice shifted. Families selected, more and more, district specified programs that were perceived as giving their offspring an edge, rather than rehabilitative programs for academically or socially struggling youngsters. The neoliberal philosophy that getting an education means selecting a product in a marketplace is more prevalent today than ever before in Vancouver and throughout BC's public education system.

There are several implications to the history of alternative and choice programs in Vancouver. One implication is that choice is not, by definition, a recent nor a neoliberal policy. Options, in the form of alternative schools, have provided students—especially at-risk students—with an education when regular public schools could not accommodate their needs. There is still a need for these programs and yet in Vancouver, though they still exist, they are shrinking in number and importance. Another implication of this history is that it offers the lesson that educational policies can have unintended consequences. When the VSB opened its boundaries in 1971, policy makers did not foresee a time when as many as one-third of Vancouver families would be crisscrossing the city seeking a school program that might give a leg up to their teenager in a hyper-competitive society. They did not foresee either a law like Bill 34 that would encourage schools to compete with one another in a market that has winners and losers. Policy makers cannot predict the future. But they can look to the past to increase their understanding of how and why things are the way they are in the present—and how they still might be changed for the better. We hope that this history of alternatives and choice in Vancouver will help them, and other interested stakeholders, to do just that.

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