

WITH Angus McBeath, Superintendent, Edmonton Public School Board



An educator for 30 years, Angus McBeath began his teaching career in 1972 in the province of Prince Edward Island. In 1976, he joined the Edmonton public school system as a teacher, and moved through the ranks as an assistant principal and as principal. In 1986, McBeath moved to an administrative role as Director of Program Development. Six years later, he was appointed Assistant Superintendent of Continuing Education Services where he served until asked to serve as Acting Superintendent. After serving in several senior executive positions in district administration, he accepted an appointment as Superintendent of Schools in September, 2001. Until his recent retirement, McBeath continued to lead the ongoing effort of Edmonton public schools to improve student achievement. McBeath has also published articles for the American Association of School Administrators and Cross City Foundation. On numerous occasions, he has been a keynote speaker on the subject of site-based decision-making and improving student achievement. McBeath is the Senior Fellow on Public Education at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, a Halifax-based policy institute. He was interviewed after delivering the 2005 Education Frontiers Lecture to a large audience at the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Education on October 12, 2005.

Frontier Centre: A book written by Bill Ouchi called *Making Schools Work* compares six different school boards in North America and concludes that the Edmonton Public School Board does very well. Why?

Angus MacBeath: Dr. Ouchi says that Edmonton exemplifies eight key characteristics you need to find in all schools, from selecting entrepreneurial principles to having a relentless focus on student achievement.

FC: How well has Edmonton done and how can you tell?

AM: I think Edmonton has done a lot of good reform work. We have done very well at changing who we are as a culture. In my view, the only one way to know if you're doing good work is to ask some questions: "Are the people you serve highly satisfied with your work and are you growing your customer base? Are you bringing in more enrolment and are your standardized achievement and high school completion results improving over time? Are your high school completion rates getting better?" I can say "yes" to all four of those.

FC: You mentioned that in fact Edmonton private schools are losing customers to the public schools. Is that not a sign of success?

AM: It's not an overall sign of success but it is one indicator of a positive move. Enrolment increases alone do not necessarily signify increasingly better-quality work on the part of the district.

FC: How important has Alberta's program of student achievement tests been in measuring performance?

AM: Absolutely crucial. When we didn't have them provincially at Grades 3, 6 and 9, we had our own at the district level. We think it is so important to measure and report results and then take action, based on targeted professional development, to change those results. We're very grateful we live in a province that honours and recognizes the crucial role accountability plays in improvement efforts.

FC: Why is it that teachers' unions typically are against testing?

AM: I don't know for sure but I think it's due to their fear that the test results will be misused. Potentially they're worried about levels of accountability.

FC: I'm going to give you some of the usual arguments against standardized testing for a quick response. First, people will teach to the test.

AM: I don't think that is all bad provided the test is good and comprehensive, but it should only be one measure of how well students are performing.

FC: Second, some schools will close.

AM: Potentially, schools do close already. Maybe some schools should close if they can't do a good job of teaching our young people.

FC: Third, parents are too stupid to understand the tests.

AM: Surprisingly in Edmonton they have been living with test results for many years now and they seem to have a pretty sophisticated understanding of that work.

FC: Last, the tests will be used against teachers.

AM: I don't think they should be used against teachers. I think they should be used to inform one's judgement about the performance of the school and the classroom over time, and ultimately the test scores are reflective of the leadership in the schools and at the district level. The test results also tell us what kind of training and support teachers and principals need.

FC: You defend teachers quite strongly, yet a lot of people have the attitude that they are paid well and that they have two months' summer holidays. Why do you think teachers are underrated?

AM: Teachers are underrated because people don't understand how complex the work they do is. It's like being on stage six-and-one-half to seven hours a day with a relentless audience. It's very, very demanding work. When you hear about heroes and heroines in newspapers and on TV, rarely do people show teachers. Yet people remember their teachers who were good until the day they die. Teachers often transform the lives of children who have everything going against them, including children who come from situations where severe deprivation exists.

FC: Why do teachers as an occupation not have the respect of other professions? You've heard the cliché, "Those who can do, and those who can't teach."

AM: I think teachers somewhat lack the professional confidence that other professions do and they believe some of the propaganda that others put out that it's not very important or critical work, or that it doesn't take great intelligence to be a teacher. I think it's harder to be a teacher than any other kind of professional in society. Yet teachers buy into some of the prevailing views of teacher critics and believe some of the propaganda that is spread around about their work because they don't often believe in standardized measurement of student achievement. They don't have absolute confidence in the results of their work.

FC: What sort of assessments is Alberta engaged in? Do you track individual students to measure year-to-year improvement?

AM: In Edmonton we track groups or cohorts of students, but we also track students who are below grade level in reading and writing in Grades 1 through 9. So, yes, there is individualized tracking of individual students.

FC: You say the results have improved over the years. Can you give us an example of drop-out rates twenty years ago versus today?

AM: I don't know the drop-out rate of twenty years ago, because I don't think we were fully able to assess it in those days. I know that over the last four years we have seen an increase from just below

64% to just about 69% in our high-school completion rate, and that percentage is about a year and four months out of date. That increase is not good enough, but it's a marked improvement and we have more recently seen a huge increase in successful individual course completions rates in all our core high-school subjects, and that will be reflected in completion rates that will be in the plus 70 percent range in the very near future.

FC: What role has competition played between schools both within the public system and from charter schools?

AM: Also with Edmonton's Roman Catholic district, they compete with us hugely and they do some of the things we do. Competition is alive and well in Edmonton, and I think that is good. Most of it is healthy competition, although some of it we have to get on top of, because it can go too far. It keeps us on our toes. We don't take our student enrolment for granted. That is important because people need to live a bit on the edge and not take the people they are supposed to serve for granted.

FC: Have private school enrolments been falling?

AM: I think they have fallen over the last ten years. I don't know where they're at right now, but I don't see much growth except for a private Islamic school. Other than that, I think the growth has been pretty flat. But we don't take our students for granted and we don't know that a new school won't open tomorrow and grab back some of our students.

FC: What is open enrolment and how does it work in Edmonton?

AM: What it means is that every child in Edmonton has a catchment area school that is assigned to them, so they are guaranteed a school. Open enrolment means that you can go to any school in the district and if there is room they will take you on a first-come, first-serve basis. All schools are open to all students in Edmonton.

FC: Could you describe the level of school-based management granted to individual public schools? How free are principals to innovate?

AM: I think principals are very free to innovate in Edmonton. All funds to operate our school district come from the provincial government. Boards in Alberta don't collect local taxes. After you peel off transportation, debt-servicing money, board governance and a couple of other things, all the remaining money in Edmonton is allocated to schools. Principals have a huge level of authority over and around the shaping of school culture, the staffing in that school, the environment, how people behave and the kind of standards that are set for that school. Principals have great discretion in terms of shaping their school community. Schools select the number and type of staff needed in the school, the organizational and instructional strategies to be used, and all services, supplies and equipment.

FC: You said the Edmonton district had pushed the spending envelope from the head office down to the school level so that ninety-two cents out of every dollar spent now is controlled by the schools. What was it before?

AM: It was around eighty to eighty-two cents before. I think we moved it up another dime in the mid-nineties.

FC: How important is the fact that individual schools do not have to purchase services from the Edmonton Public School Board?

AM: I think it is crucial. If you force people to acquire or buy in-house services all the time, it can create a level of complacency on the part of the service providers that we don't want. We want our service providers to be customer-focused and service-orientated. We believe that not taking your customers for granted is absolutely crucial to ensuring a high quality of service. And our annual survey of principal satisfaction shows great respect and support for the district's central staff who provide services to schools.

FC: As the work migrated to private vendors, have there been job losses?

AM: We both lost and gained jobs. We have lost some service staff through attrition because some areas of service weren't sustained once the schools had the choice to buy them or not buy them.

FC: What did the union say to these services being subject to competition?

AM: I think the union wasn't altogether pleased. The trades union and maintenance union were opposed to this move, more than anybody else, and it was their membership that has found it the hardest to migrate towards this way of operating. I think they have gone a long way in understanding that that is who we are and how we operate and these staff provide tremendous support to our schools.

FC: Have you been able to see or calculate how much the savings were in percentage terms?

AM: No, we have not done that, nor would I advise it.

FC: How much latitude are individual schools given in decisions about staffing, pay and benefit levels?

AM: Schools determine what kind of staff they need, whether they need math teachers or secretaries or support staff or how many custodians or whether they want to have a reading specialist or a teacher librarian or a councillor on staff. They can also determine the level of complexity of each of the jobs. But they don't get to determine how much people are paid. What people are paid is controlled centrally.

FC: Are there parent councils?

AM: Under provincial legislation there are mandatory school councils in Alberta so every school in Edmonton whose parents want one, which is virtually all of them, has a school council.

FC: What powers do these councils have? For example, in New Zealand the councils actually hire the teachers.

AM: In Alberta the school councils are advisory. Principals and teachers have mandatory positions, but parents must outnumber the staff.

FC: The council can't get rid of the principal?

AM: The council cannot get rid of the principal. I suppose over time, if successive school councils have no confidence in the principal, that that would mean that the administration would have to take some action. So councils cannot get rid of principals nor should they.

FC: Why do you have councils?

AM: So that parents will have a more guaranteed opportunity in helping principals and school staff think about the work that they are doing in the school. For example, when trustees review school plans, they always asks the question, "How was your parent council involved in that decision?" There are certain kinds of decisions that we think school councils should be part of and, if your school council's on your side, you can get more done than if you have to work without their support.

FC: Are the schools allowed to hire teachers who are not certified by a university?

AM: No.

FC: Edmonton spends less money on bureaucrats and more on teachers than most places in North America. How have you escaped the grasp of the so-called educrats?

AM: When, outside of transportation, debt servicing, board governance and administration, you only have eight percent of the budget held centrally, you don't have enough money to hire more central staff. Our central staff will tell you we are understaffed and I have some sympathy for them. I think it's a culture that doesn't have a high tolerance for bureaucracy, and the schools wouldn't put up with it either. We don't have the money anyway.

FC: Have Alberta teacher unions softened their opposition to school choice and standardized testing?

AM: I can't speak for the Association's work in this area. My belief is that teachers in Alberta have come to understand the architecture of Alberta's education system. One of the facts of life in Alberta is standardized measurement of achievement.

FC: Edmonton's system enjoys an extraordinary level of diversity in programming. Do you think you would have lost more students to private schools without it?

AM: We would have not only lost students to private schools without it, we would have lost students to the Catholic system and the charter schools. We would probably have another ten charter schools in Edmonton were it not for our programs of choice. Probably we would have lost or not kept several thousand students. That's how important this issue is for us.

FC: In most provinces, curricular issues are tightly controlled. Do Edmonton schools have more freedom to decide content than in other jurisdictions?

AM: Edmonton teachers have virtually no decision-making over what teachers teach. That is controlled by the Province of Alberta and is something I would never see decentralized to the schools. I just don't think it would be right.

FC: Why is that?

AM: I think low-income schools would have less rigorous curriculum than high-income ones. I don't think people would mean to do that, but it would happen. We don't have a set of writing standards for low-income schools that is different for a rich school.

FC: How many individual schools cater to special needs?

AM: Virtually all of them. Students are either enrolled in separate sites or in inclusion settings where children are part of the regular classroom.

FC: So I guess we talking mainstreaming here?

AM: That is not a word we use; we use the word inclusive education. But it is a form of mainstreaming.

FC: Is there a better alternative than mainstreaming?

AM: Well, we have both district sites and mainstreaming. Is one option better than the other? I don't know for sure. I think that mainstreaming can work and is often the right think to do. It is also hard to do sometimes; it doesn't always make sense, particularly if schools do not have the resources or commitment to support it appropriately.

FC: Here in Manitoba, a lot of people put their kids in independent schools to get away from mainstreaming. Your comment.

AM: It is a moral issue. I think there are some people that might resist having severe special-needs students in their children's classroom. However, if the right supports are in place, the education of other students should never suffer because of the inclusion of the student in the room. Would some people resist having their children in a room with some other children? I am sure they do.

FC: What do you think about whole language?

AM: "Whole language"—whatever that means, because the thing has a number of iterations—is something we don't support in our school district, because we think, even if it had good points, its implementation in the past has been deleterious to some children's abilities to learn to read and write. So we don't endorse that kind of approach to the teaching of reading.

FC: So you use phonics?

AM: The district program in which we train most of our teachers at the elementary level is called balanced literacy. Balanced literacy has within it a very substantial section on phonics teaching. This is a very respected element of teaching, but it is not the be-all or end-all of our teaching in our district. We balance it with other approaches to teaching reading.

FC: On the PISA tests, Alberta scores the best in Canada. Why?

AM: First of all, I think that Alberta students are used to the fact that they need to learn, to be held accountable, and are used to have their achievement measured. Because we measure achievement, I also think teachers are very focused on making sure students learn what the government believes they need to learn. So there is a lot of what is called curriculum alignment going on. Do I think Alberta kids are

smarter? No, but I think they get great teaching in our province on the whole and we have both students and teachers who feel really accountable about the results.

FC: Why is it that other provinces tend to not embrace Alberta's approach to education?

AM: Number one, I don't know that what Alberta does is always admired elsewhere. I think that some of our paths have not always been conducive to other provinces' following us or doing what we are doing. Secondly, I think that there is some real resistance in some other provinces' education establishments to support standardized measurement because of the accountability factor. It is human nature. It is a lot of work. It costs money. It creates negative pushback. A lot of jurisdictions, I think, don't want to disturb complacency.

FC: Isn't measurement a fact of life in all professions and all other parts of life?

AM: Not all professions have public accountability. In most areas of life, measurement is so much a fact that people scratch their heads in wonder at the education system when it doesn't measure. In fact one of the worries I have is, if you don't measure, you don't know how you're doing, and then the result is dissatisfaction and cynicism about the education system. In order to regain and make sure that teachers have the respect they deserve, we need to measure results and report how well we are doing. When we are not doing well, we have to have a plan to change those results.

FC: You said that teachers should be apprentices for the first several years. Why?

AM: I believe that teaching is extremely complex work, that universities cannot possibly replicate the classroom and that it takes a number of years to become a seasoned teacher of quality. What we tend to do is put first-year teachers in really difficult assignments without the support they require to gain the confidence, knowledge and training that they need in order to be excellent. We don't turn doctors and lawyers out of university and put them straight away into practice by themselves. Lawyers have to article and doctors have to intern in hospitals. Doctors and lawyers go through a long gestation period. But in education we graduate new teachers and then immediately put them into classrooms by themselves. It's not fair or appropriate in my view, but it is a matter of resources and maybe undervaluing the complexity of the work that teachers do.

FC: Isn't there also a downside compared to a lot of professions? We have lawyers who make two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year and doctors with high incomes, whereas teachers tend to be paid the same amount of money. Why not pay teachers a hundred thousand dollars?

AM: I'm not sure that how you pay teachers has a huge impact on how you incubate them. Teachers' salaries in Edmonton at the top end are well into the seventy-thousand-plus dollar range, so it wouldn't at all surprise me that we will have hundred-thousand-dollar teachers some day. We have a number of a hundred-thousand-dollar plus principals, and worth every penny of it.

FC: You don't like the term "inner-city" school, you prefer "centre city" school?

AM: City centre. "Inner city" conjures up a lot of negative images, like poverty and deprivation. We have got to view students in city-core schools as winners not as losers, so we call them "city-centre students" because we don't want to create culturally negative images about our young people.

FC: Traditionally, the best principal jobs were out in the suburbs. You have reversed that so that really good ones are also in the city centre. Why?

AM: For some of our principals, the more exciting work is in the city centre in Edmonton. I deliberately make an effort to select excellent principals for the city centre. They will get a level of collegiality that is second to none because of the way we have structured those schools. Although they are organized as individual schools, they are part of a collaborative group of schools and they get extra financial resources as well as support from a co-ordinator who accesses needed services

from the community for them. I think in order to break the poverty gap, the poverty situation with city-centre students, we need to give them a sterling education. The best anti poverty program in the world is called an education and it sure beats all of the remedial work that society tries to do after the fact.

FC: Isn't it true, though, that in the traditional school systems the inner city is the dumping ground for the worst teachers and the worst principals?

AM: I don't know that. That could be a temptation because parents aren't as demanding in the city centre as they are in the well-to-do suburbs. In my view, city-centre students deserve first-rate staff. The suburbs are generally well-positioned to ensure their interests are addressed.

FC: To sum up, what you are saying is that the answer to privatization, independent schools and charter schools is to have a high-performing, customer-focused public school system?

AM: That's right. I am not going to worry about the future of public education so long as it is strong and delivers the results and satisfy the people who pay for it. I don't worry about private education or private medicine, as long as the public system accepts the challenge and is willing to compete. We only deserve to last as long, however, as we retain the confidence of our community and our families.

FC: You are about to retire in a couple of weeks. What are you going to do?

AM: I am going to stay involved with public education because it is in my blood stream. I am going to work with some interested parties who want to have a discourse on how to get the best out of the dollars we are spending on public education. I don't have everything all mapped out in my future, but it will include some public speaking and some coaching.

FC: Does one have to be careful in how one assesses schools? Are there downsides to school report cards?

AM: I'm glad you asked that question, because there is more than one think tank in Canada producing report cards on schools. The worry I have about report cards is that their rankings could be referenced using a single criterion. The marks in a particular school could be presented without providing context or other important achievements for that school could be overlooked. If you have a large

population of special-need students, that can affect you results. When somebody reads a ranking of schools, people assume everything is the same, when it isn't. My fear is that if we don't rank carefully, we may kill the very basis upon which we now assess how well schools are performing, and that achievement testing could get thrown out by default. I don't absolutely object to ranking, but I do strongly encourage anyone that is in the business of ranking schools to be pretty thoughtful about how they do it. I think that the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies in Halifax, Nova Scotia, does a very thoughtful job on its report card on Atlantic high schools, especially in light of how difficult it is to get public information on high school performance in that region.

FC: Why is it that governments don't provide that ranking information as they do in other countries, thus providing an opportunity for think tanks to create report cards?

AM: I have never found governments to be terribly self-revealing in this country about the quality of the work that goes on in their public schools, let alone their private schools.

FC: You are quite keen on the book, *The World is Flat*, by Thomas Freidman. Why is it an important book?

AM: It points out by implication that North American education systems or students cannot rest on their laurels with their current level of commitment to learning and the need for life-long learning. In China and India, there are tens of millions of young people who are multilingual or bilingual who work very hard and are already fiercely competing for good jobs with our young people. This is something new for Canadians.

FC: You mentioned the difference between admiring Bill Gates and the rock star, Britney Spears.

AM: The author says that in India educated young people aspire to be like Bill Gates and that in America young people aspire to be like Britney Spears.

FC: Is that bad?

AM: Dr. Freidman thinks it is something to worry about. Many young Americans, and I am sure it is true for Canadians, have been brought up in pretty good times. They have never had to fight or compete for their existence. A nation obsessed with celebrities may not be ready to match these young Indian and Chinese students.