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## All Girl Cooking Band School?

Kate Tennier, National Post · Wednesday, Mar. 31, 2010

I was chatting the other day with some home-schoolers about why their children do so well when they head back into the system. To a person they said it was because their child actually had a "choice" as to whether to attend school or not.

What parents know, and what is demonstrated in studies such as the one released last year by Quebec economists Pierre Lefebvre and Philip Merrigan on the benefits of publicly subsidizing private schools, is that choice is the driver of educational success and yet it is the one element that so rarely exists in our public school system.

That is why the Toronto District School Board's proposal to create four new "academies" through a program that actually has the word choice in it -- Elementary Programs of Choice -- is intriguing. Intriguing, but flawed.

The board says it will ensure access to all who sign up, but its track record strongly suggests otherwise. Year after year, its existing specialty and alternative schools turn away far more applicants than they accept. The TDSB knows the demand is there but has done little to rectify this problem. Its promise of universal access now is seriously suspect.

Then there is the question of which programs will be offered. Why All Girls, All Singing, All Sports? Why not All Band, All Cooking, All Computers? And the fact that the board is considering placing these programs within "high needs" schools is problematic: The greater opportunities received by students in these schools-within-schools and the fact that there is little interaction between the "chosen" and the "locals" creates an upstairs-downstairs effect that benefits no one.

The board's education director, Chris Spence, has stated that one reason for this initiative is to stem the flow of students from the public to the private system. It is not surprising then that I find myself on my more cynical days imagining a statistician beavering away at board headquarters doing the math as to just how

much choice they need to offer to retain the students -- and their funding -- who would otherwise go to private schools.

And it is this very calculation, the one that says "choice but not too much" that creates the problem. "Calculated choice" is a well-known tactic of monopolistic systems to satiate the demands -- and thereby quell the voices -- of the empowered few who would otherwise demand much-needed structural change.

Advocates of "as is" public schooling such as Annie Kidder of the group People for Education caution against offering more choice as a way of solving this problem on the grounds that it erodes something they call social cohesion. But the argument that the socioeconomic mix of neighbourhood schools will be compromised if the cream goes elsewhere, is a non-starter.

Unlike days of yore, when rich and poor lived together side-by-side in towns and small cities, suburbanization and other changes in real estate patterns has led to schools becoming so self-segregated that the social-cohesion argument no longer stands.

In fact, serious reformers know that the only solution is to offer families more choice, not less, including an equitably funded one-way ticket out of their local public school.

An unintended consequence of school desegregation in the United States was "white flight," something that ended up harming more than helping poor inner-city children.

The great American educator James Coleman realized the only way to remedy this wrong created by a system that favoured the already empowered was to help families get out of that very system through educational vouchers -- in other words, to give families more choice, not less. This back story to Coleman's brave reversal of opinion has striking similarities to what is playing out before us with the TDSB.

The school board's "calculated choice" -- delivered in a top-down manner -- will not serve those who need it most. It will only be when every family is empowered through deliberate and real choice that educational success might finally become a reality for all.