

Parents and School Choice: What Are The Implications?

School choice allows parents to decide where to send their children to school, regardless of their location of residence. Research reveals that families – across ethnicities, income levels and socioeconomic statuses – consider common factors when choosing schools. These factors include *high academic results, curriculum offerings, teacher quality, small class sizes*, and the availability of *day care and extracurricular activities*. However, parents of lower socioeconomic status tend to rank *safe environment* as their primary concern, while parents of higher socioeconomic status prioritize the values that schools embrace. Although public schools are often assigned to children based on where they live, this difference in priorities reflects the diverse needs, interests and expectations of both students and parents when choosing a school.

Allowing parents to select which schools their children will attend has several implications, including:

- **Increasing parents' choice over how and where their children are educated.** This gives parents a sense of ownership and enthusiasm, which contributes to improvements in student performance.
- **Recognizing that learners are individuals with unique talents and specialized needs.** Choice gives parents the freedom to find a school that will design curricula to accommodate their children's needs. This is especially advantageous for children with learning differences, allowing schools to focus specifically on supporting students with special needs.
- **Forcing schools to compete for student enrollment.** If schools are to survive in a competitive education market and continuously attract students, they must adapt their programming to reflect parental wishes. While this may bring new approaches into schools and support greater accountability, constant adaptation can take attention away from building durable initiatives that enhance student learning in the long-term.
- **Increasing student turnover.** More desirable schools may receive greater enrolment, leading to decreased enrolment in less desirable schools and an inability of these schools to offer quality programming.

Evidence suggests that increased choice can lead to greater inequality across schools, reduce diversity and further negatively impact students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As disadvantaged parents are more likely to have limited access to information and resources, they may experience difficulty in making informed school choice decisions. Therefore, ensuring equity must be considered in school choice initiatives to offset any barriers related to income and other resources.

For online resources as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education