

STUDENTS MAY ATTEND ANY B.C. SCHOOL

EDUCATION | It's the first year students have had this right. By Janet Steffenhagen

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This year, for the first time, B.C. students have a right to attend any public school in the province — providing there is

space after students in the school's neighbourhood have been accommodated.

The change is part of the Liberal government's promise to provide more choice in educa-

tion, but many say the right to cross school boundaries doesn't come close to satisfying demand for more options in the public school system.

Schools with stellar reputations and/or unusual programs (traditional and fine arts, for example) fill quickly and often have waiting lists. Despite interest, the variety

of educational offerings in the public system is largely the same as when the Liberals came to power two years ago.

The options in B.C. are still slim compared to those available in Edmonton, an international leader in school choice that the Liberals had hoped to emulate by

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hiring Emery Dosdall, former Edmonton superintendent, as deputy education minister.

Katherine Wagner, a Maple-Ridge-Pitt Meadows school trustee, said school boards haven't embraced the Liberal dream of more specialized magnet schools that draw students from a wide geographic area, more program variety within neighbourhood schools and more variations in school calendars.

"Philosophically, it's going in a different direction than where we've been going in education for a long time," she said. "People's mind-sets, philosophies and ways of managing don't change overnight."

Wagner is convinced parents want more choice but said they rarely have the time, energy or power to spur the change. Boards must take the lead, but many aren't doing so because they are at odds politically with the Liberals, are still integrating new trustees elected last fall or are consumed by budget worries, she said.

Terri Elliott, a Pitt Meadows parent who mounted a vigorous campaign to establish a balanced school calendar at Davie Jones elementary, is adamant that boards need to be more pro-active.

She said she spent 600 volunteer hours from October until March researching calendar modifications, discussing the plan with parents and trying to sell it to staff. It was tough slog-ging, even though the idea of shorter holidays during the year instead of a two-month summer break had already proven popular at nearby Kanaka Creek elementary and had the potential of halting a dangerous slide in enrolment at Davie Jones.

The experience taught her more about school and union politics than she wanted to know. Although finally successful, Elliott was left wondering how many other parents have the time or skills to tackle such a job.

"Parents can do it up to a certain point," she said, but then someone from within the system has to "water the seeds of ideas and help them grow."

A businesswoman, Elliott said parents and students are customers of the education system and shouldn't be expected to steer it in a new direction.

"In the private sector, you don't have your customers coming in and telling you how to make changes. They give you feedback, but you don't see the customer driving the change," she said.

Anne Marie Denley had a similar experience in trying to introduce uniforms to her children's school, Irwin Park elementary in West Vancouver. She said she's making progress but it's taken two years.

"It's very time-consuming," she said. "People who try this often get frustrated and just give up ... but I'm not a giver-upper."

Wagner said the school choice debate has been highly politicized in B.C., and parents often don't know what they're getting into when they begin lobbying for change. "Even using the wrong word — quite innocently — can get you into trouble," she said.

School boards have different reasons for not moving to create more choice. Some say they already offer sufficient options, some say there isn't demand and several say they can't plan new programs when they're struggling to keep existing ones.

