

Whose Parents? What Choice?  
A Study of Parents of Grade 7 Students  
Choosing a High School Program for Their Children

by

Janet Elizabeth Pritchard

B.Mus. The University of British Columbia, 1978

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies  
(Department of Educational Studies)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standard

The University of British Columbia

August 2003

© Janet Elizabeth Pritchard, 2003

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Educational Studies

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date August 25, 2003

## ABSTRACT

School choice is an important and controversial policy issue in education. Proponents of school choice maintain that it will be of particular benefit to those families who are less able to choose schools by residing in desirable neighbourhoods or sending their children to expensive private schools. However, the literature suggests that unless school choice programs are specifically targeted towards lower-class families, schools that are available by choice will tend to attract a disproportionate number of middle-class students. In part, this is theorized as being the result of a disparity in social and cultural capital between middle-class and working-class parents. Social capital includes the networks and other sources of information available to parents. Cultural capital involves the parents' abilities to evaluate the options that will best facilitate their children's future educational and occupational goals. This study was designed to consider the issue in an urban British Columbian context.

Parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver have several choices when selecting high schools for their children. Recent legislation opening catchment boundaries permits a wider range of choices than ever before. Because of space limitations, however, many popular high schools are unable to accommodate all the students who wish to attend. This leaves parents with two choices for public high school: registering in the neighbourhood high school or choosing a District Specified Alternative Program. The alternative programs in this study are those that are designed to provide an enriched academic program for students who demonstrate high potential and talent – the mini schools. Neighbourhood high schools serve all students in their catchment area and require no special application procedures. In order to attend a mini school, however, there is a lengthy admission process, typically involving a written application form, letters of recommendation from teachers and others who know the child's ability and motivation, a written admission exam, and a personal interview. Spaces are limited, so only a small number of students enter these programs.

I studied parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver as they considered their high school options. First, I interviewed Grade 7 teachers at two Vancouver elementary schools in order to identify the high school programs that tend to attract parents in each school and to understand the teachers' roles in providing information about high school options. I also attended parent information meetings for eight of the twelve District Specified Alternative Programs throughout the district. I administered a survey to Grade 7 parents at these schools, as they were completing the process of applying to high school programs. I followed this up by asking the elementary teachers about the high school programs in which the students at each school eventually enrolled.

I found that, in these two Vancouver elementary schools, parents who chose alternative programs had higher levels of education, particularly on the east side of the city, and more prestigious occupations than those who chose to send their child to the neighbourhood high school. I also discovered that parents who chose alternative high school programs used a greater variety of sources of information to learn about high school programs than parents choosing regular programs in the neighbourhood school. They also considered criteria about programs and learning conditions to be more important when evaluating the programs available.

I conclude that information should be made more equitably available to parents in Vancouver. Moreover, offering school choice through alternative programs in neighbourhood schools, as opposed to a system of magnet schools located throughout the city, seems to offer more possibilities for equity.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Chapter I     The Context of this Study.....	1
Personal Position.....	2
Forces Driving the Movement towards Parental Choice.....	4
School Choice in Canada: Alberta Leads the Way.....	6
Ministry of Education Position on School Choice in British Columbia....	7
Responses to the Issue of School Choice.....	9
B.C. Principals' and Vice Principals' Association.....	9
B.C. Teachers' Federation.....	10
B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils .....	10
School Boards .....	12
High School Choices in Vancouver.....	13
Neighbourhood High Schools.....	13
District Specified Alternative Programs.....	14
Objectives of the study.....	15
Chapter II     Literature Review.....	17
The Case for Parental Choice – and a Rebuttal:.....	17
Questions of Class and Cultural Capital – and a Rebuttal .....	21
How do Parental Choice and Equity Co-Exist in Vancouver?.....	26
Research Questions Arising from the Literature.....	27
Chapter III     Research Design.....	29
Selecting a Sample – Grade 7 Parents.....	32
Elementary Schools Participating in the Survey.....	33
Westview Elementary School.....	34
Eastling Elementary School.....	35
Characteristics of the Grade 7 Teacher Interview Population.....	36
Interviews with Grade 7 Teachers.....	37
Parent Information Nights at the Mini Schools.....	38
Characteristics of the Grade 7 Parent Survey Population.....	38
Surveys administered to Grade 7 Parents.....	39
Data Collection Procedures.....	40
Data Organization and Analysis.....	42
Ethical Considerations and Credibility.....	44

Chapter IV	Research Findings from Interviews and Observations.....	45
	The Teacher Interviews.....	45
	Westview Elementary School.....	46
	Eastling Elementary School.....	47
	Parent Information Meetings at the Mini Schools.....	50
	Byng Arts Mini School.....	50
	Killarney Mini School.....	52
	Point Grey Min School.....	55
	John Oliver Mini School.....	57
	David Thompson Odyssey Program.....	58
	Britannia Venture Program.....	59
	Ideal Mini School.....	61
	Tupper Mini School.....	62
	Other Programs.....	63
	Summary of Interviews and Observations.....	64
Chapter V	Research Findings from Grade 7 Parent Survey.....	67
	Family Demographics that have an Impact on School Choice.....	67
	Family Residence and School Choice.....	67
	Parents' Education and School Choice.....	73
	Parents' Occupation and School Choice.....	83
	Sources of Information used by Parents.....	91
	Criteria used to Evaluate High School Programs.....	99
	Results of Applications Made to Alternative Programs.....	113
	Summary of Survey Results.....	116
Chapter VI	Conclusions and Recommendations.....	118
	Whose Parents?.....	118
	What Choices?.....	121
	Equalizing Educational Opportunities.....	123
	School Choice and Achievement.....	124
	The Role of the Grade 7 Teachers in School Choice.....	126
	The Role of the School Board in Parental Choice.....	128
	Final Thoughts.....	134
References.....		135
Appendix A	Letter to Vancouver School Board.....	139
Appendix B	Letter to School Principals.....	140
Appendix C	Teacher's Interview Consent Form.....	141
Appendix D	Questions used in Teacher Interviews.....	142
Appendix E	Parent Survey.....	144

## List of Tables

Table 1	Comparison of Choices of High School Programs made by Parents at Westview and Eastling.....	68
Table 2	Levels of Education of Parents Choosing Alternative Programs or Regular Programs in Neighbourhood Schools.....	74
Table 3	Comparison of the Levels of Education of Parents at Westview and Eastling.....	75
Table 4	Comparison of the Levels of Education of Parents Choosing High School Programs.....	76
Table 5	Occupational Prestige of Parents Choosing Alternative Programs or Regular Programs in Neighbourhood Schools.....	85
Table 6	Occupational Prestige of Parents whose Children Attended Westview and Eastling.....	87
Table 7	Comparison of Occupational Prestige of Parents Choosing High School Programs.....	88
Table 8	Extent to which Parents Agreed with Statements Concerning the Sources of Information that Influenced their Choice of High School.....	94
Table 9	Extent to which Parents from Westview and Eastling Agreed with Statements Concerning Sources of Information that Influenced their High School Choice.....	96
Table 10	Degree to which Parents Agreed that the Following Criteria were Important when Considering a High School Program for their Child.....	101
Table 11	Degree to which Parents from Westview and Eastling Indicated that the Following Criteria were Important when Considering a High School Program for their Child.....	109-110
Table 12	Comparison of the High School Programs in which Students at Westview and Eastling will be Enrolled in September 2003.....	113

## Acknowledgements

It has taken a village to complete this thesis and I would like to acknowledge the many people who made it possible. I would especially like to thank Dr. Jane Gaskell for all her patience and encouragement. I could not have worked with a more knowledgeable and caring advisor. I also wish to thank the other members of my committee – Dr. Lesley Andres and Dr. Charles Ungerleider -- for taking over Jane's duties when she moved from U.B.C. to become dean at O.I.S.E. Their careful attention to the details of revising and defending the paper was invaluable and deeply appreciated. I thank Dr. Andre Mazawi for the enthusiasm he showed for my research and his willingness to offer criticism as my external examiner. Thank you to Roweena Bacchus and Jeannie Young for their patience with my many questions. Educational Studies is fortunate to have their expertise. Thank you to the many teachers who contributed to my growth and understanding over the three years of this degree – Dr. Leslie Roman, Dr. Kogila Adam-Moodley, Dr. Wendy Poole and others. They are all part of this final paper. I was also grateful to the University of British Columbia for their financial assistance in the form of a Masters Student Research/Project Grant.

None of this would have been possible without the love and support of my family and friends. Thank you to my teaching colleagues at Westridge Elementary School for being my cheerleaders and occasionally picking up the slack for me at school. Thank you, Bob, for all your advice and your unfailing belief that I would complete this degree. To my children -- Kaitlyn, Robert, and Meghan – thanks for understanding when I was not always there for you. We all grew a lot during these three years and you are amazing people. I promised Mom it would be my turn some day. It took a lot longer than I expected, but I can now cross this off my “to do” list and move on. Thanks to all the love and support, it's done.

## Chapter I – The Context of this Study

Proponents of school choice believe that it will empower all parents in the public school system. Many maintain that increased parental choice will be of particular benefit to those with lower socioeconomic status who are less able to choose schools by residing in desirable catchment areas or sending their children to expensive private schools. Opponents argue that choices in the public school system have been shown worldwide to favour highly-educated, middle-class families. Studies done in the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe, where educational choices are more widely available than in Canada, suggest that higher S.E.S. families are the ones who take advantage of enriched opportunities for their children and are over-represented in schools that are available by choice.

Empowering parents within the public school system is a movement that has caught on throughout the western world. Study after study suggests that a relationship exists between parental involvement in their child's education and the child's educational success. Many proponents of educational change have used this research to promote their philosophy of a market-driven education system. They believe that "parental involvement" should go beyond participation within a specific school and extend to educational advocacy by parents on behalf of their children. One of the most effective ways of advocating for a child's education, according to the market philosophy, is to shop for the school program that offers the best value for the family's educational investment.

Drawing upon the rhetoric of the business community, parents and students are posited as consumers of educational resources, while schools are assigned the role of service provider. Terms like "competition", "achievement", and "accountability" redefine the role of the public school in society. This redefinition inevitably precipitates tension between the concepts of education as a public social benefit and education as a private consumer good.



There is also a danger that creating a marketplace mentality may exacerbate the inequity already inherent in a system in which some parents are more proactive and influential than others. School choice prompts consideration of the purpose of public education and the desirability of all children having an equitable opportunity to reach their potential and achieve success, however that may be defined and measured.

### *Personal Position*

As a Grade 7 teacher in Burnaby, I have counseled many students and their parents as they chose their high school courses. Students from the elementary school at which I teach are in the catchment area for Burnaby North Secondary School. It is difficult in Burnaby for students to cross catchment boundaries and attend a high school of their choice. Accordingly, most students must attend their neighbourhood high school. There are no "District Specified Alternative Programs" in Burnaby, although some program options do exist. Burnaby South Secondary School offers the International Baccalaureate Program, although this option is facing elimination in the current program review being done by the school board in order to submit a balanced budget to the Ministry of Education. Moscrop Secondary School provides French Immersion. Most of the other high schools have Advanced Placement courses at the Grade 12 level.

As my own three children have made their way through their neighbourhood school -- Burnaby North Secondary School -- I have become aware that it provides a wide range of choices. Students begin their journey along one option at the moment they select their Grade 8 courses. As students make the transition from Grade 7 to Grade 8, they have the option of taking regular courses, modified or adapted courses designed for students with special learning needs, or honours courses in English, Math, and Social Studies. Regular courses are available to all students living in the high school catchment area. The modified and adapted courses are selected only after a great deal of consultation among the child's parents, the high school counselor and

teachers, and the Grade 7 teacher. The honours courses are available to students who are recommended by their Grade 7 teacher to write an entrance exam in the spring. If students are successful in gaining entrance to these honours courses, they may eventually be permitted to accelerate their high school program (in a manner very similar to many of the mini schools) and either graduate early or take Advanced Placement (university level) courses while in high school.

Before my own children benefited from the acceleration possible on the honours track, I was very selective about the students that I informed about and recommended for the Grade 8 honours courses. I felt that these courses were a privilege for hard-working "gifted" students. As I realized more clearly the ramifications of my acting as gate-keeper to the honours track, however, I began advertising this option more widely, informing parents about the advantages of the honours track, and allowing any student who expressed a desire and demonstrated their motivation to write the entrance exam to do so. Since then, more of my students have successfully entered honours courses and benefited from the accelerated stream.

I wondered before embarking on this study if the Grade 7 teachers in Vancouver ensure that all students are informed of the District Specified Alternative Programs or if they, as I formerly did, only informed "the chosen few". I also wondered if it were easy for parents to learn about these programs on their own, without having to pass the elementary school gate keeper, and if the district ensured that information about these programs reached all the students who might potentially benefit from them. Finally, I wondered how effectively Vancouver's District Specified Alternative Programs address the issue of equity of educational opportunity.

Having taken several graduate level courses focusing on educational policy and equity I have become more aware of my role as gatekeeper and my duty to act as an advocate for students and parents who may not normally be "choosers" in the public school system. I was interested in discovering whether the socioeconomic and cultural inequity that choice seems to engender

wherever it is offered is as discernable in Vancouver's mini schools as I suspect it is in the Advanced Placement courses at Burnaby North Secondary School.

### *Forces Driving the Movement towards Parental Choice*

Three reasons commonly cited for providing parents with more choice in the public school system are the belief that "the academic achievement of our students is mediocre compared to that of their peers in other countries" (Hepburn, 1999, p. 1), "confidence in the [public school] system is at a 30-year low" (Hepburn, 1999, p.1), and "public schools must compete head-to-head with independent schools...to stem the drift of K-12 students into the private system" (Steffenhagen, 2001, September 27, p. A1).

Hepburn (1999) declares that "The Canadian system of education is inefficient and inadequate" (p. 1). Over and over parents are warned that their children are not receiving as high a quality of education as they would in other countries. Parents are encouraged to demand more accountability and choice in schooling to combat the threat posed by the inadequate preparation of their child for life in the global economy. District Specified Alternative Programs provide parents in Vancouver with choices that offer a select group of students an enriched education within the public school system and which may give them an competitive edge, academically.

Not all schools are created equal and some schools enjoy more success in their testing results than others. Publishing test scores that indicate those schools in which students perform best on standardized tests is used by some as a means of making schools and teachers more accountable to parents. Allowing parents then to choose the schools in which students are more successful is posited as being the way to encourage all schools to adopt the teaching strategies and philosophies of the more successful schools so that every child in the system will eventually benefit. Proponents of choice also claim that empowering parents with choices will boost

parental confidence in the public school system, as they feel they have some control over their child's educational options (Chubb & Moe, 1988, Hoxby, 1998).

The dilemma is that when capable students leave less academically-desirable schools this further depresses the test results of the schools they leave, creating the illusion of declining achievement among the students remaining at the school. Vancouver has addressed this issue by locating mini schools in a variety of public secondary schools around the district. Providing enriched environments for the most capable students in each school may encourage some of these students to attend a school they might otherwise find academically undesirable. This could, in turn, improve the test results of that school, restore public confidence, and reduce the number of students leaving a school because it is perceived to be a less effective learning environment.

A common justification for providing more choice in the public school system is to stem the flow of students into private schools. This is a concern expressed by B.C.'s Minister of Education, in spite of the fact that there has been relatively little movement into private schools, due to the cost of such a move and the selectivity of the private schools. Furthermore, many parents select private schools because of a religious affiliation not available in the public school system. By placing the mini schools in public secondary schools throughout the district, the Vancouver School Board provides parents with an opportunity to find within their neighbourhood school the enriched learning environment many seek for their child. This may keep in the public system some who might otherwise opt for an enriched private alternative.

Hepburn (1999) claims international research supports her position that "if the Canadian education system supported greater parental choice, student achievement would improve" (p. 1). There is, however, much evidence that the relationship between choice and achievement is not so clear-cut, particularly for students whose background is not middle class.

### *School Choice in Canada: Alberta Leads the Way*

Within Canada, Alberta is far ahead of other provinces in the range of educational choices offered to parents. The most obvious indicator is the legislation allowing charter schools. There are currently nine charter schools, set up by parents and other groups to provide a variety of educational, social, and cultural experiences for public school students. They include school programs for gifted students, Arabic students (for whom English is a second language), at-risk students, and musically talented students. The number of charter schools in Alberta has remained small because of the tremendous amount of parental involvement required to create and maintain such programs and tight government control over these schools. Still, the existence of these charter schools attests to the commitment that "the Alberta government supports choice in education to ensure student and community needs are met" ("Opportunities for Choice", p.1).

Alberta also has urban school boards that have pioneered programs of choice. The Edmonton Public School Board declares on the district website that "choice is the foundation of our district's approach to education" ("Programs of Choice", p. 1). They offer a wide variety of programs to all students in the district. These range from Aboriginal studies to the Vimy Ridge Academy Dance Program and include programs in hockey, Christian education, Arabic, Cree, French, German, Hebrew, Spanish, Mandarin, Ukrainian, Arts, and Cadets, to name but a few. If the range of choices is not wide enough, parents are invited to generate their own ideas and submit them to the district for approval. The district website advises parents that programs are open to all children in the district "as long as there is space available at the school and you meet the entrance criteria that may be in place" ("Programs of Choice", p. 3). Busing is available, for a fee, at the elementary level in an attempt to ensure that location of the school is a minimal deterrent to anyone applying to a program. The Calgary school board also provides a great deal of choice.

Some concerns about the equity of school choice are raised by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Their brochure on the topic of educational choice states that

some people regard education as a market commodity and students and their parents as consumers of that commodity. However, not all consumers are equal: some have more social and economic resources and hence will have greater influence over which programs will be made available. Our public education system has an important role to play in bringing together children from a wide variety of backgrounds to share a common learning experience. Taken to extremes, educational choice fragments public education and, over the long run, could undermine the unity and cohesion of our community.

("Educational Choice", p. 2)

It was interesting to read these concerns about educational equity in a public education system so generally supportive of school choice.

#### *Ministry of Education Position on School Choice in British Columbia*

B.C.'s Minister of Education, Christy Clark has repeatedly expressed her belief that "B.C. public schools must compete head-to-head with independent schools by offering a wide variety of programs and 'magnet' schools to stem the drift of K - 12 students into the private system" (Steffenhagen, 2001, Sept. 27, p. A1). Partly to forward this agenda, Emery Dosdall, the former Superintendent of the Edmonton Public School Board who supported the establishment of the magnet schools in that district, was hired by the Liberal government as Deputy Minister of Education in British Columbia. The government website states that "this government believes in public education and wants to compete with private schools by offering more choice to students" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 1). The Ministry of Education insists that public school results must be competitive with the results achieved by private school programs, in spite of the

fact that these schools are permitted to be very exclusive both in the academic entrance standards they set and in the fees they charge. Upper-middle-class parents who can afford the fees and whose children meet the entrance criteria have always taken advantage of private school choices and will likely continue to do so because of considerations other than the academic programs offered. There is a great deal of research to support the allegation that these parents are also the group most likely to benefit from choices provided in the public school system. The Minister of education reports that "I hear a call for choice from parents everywhere I go" (Steffenhagen, 2001, Sept. 28, p. B2). I cannot help but wonder which socioeconomic stratum of parents is most likely to have the ear of the Minister of Education.

The Ministry of Education believes that "parents have a right to be involved in their children's education and they must have choices about how their children will be educated" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 1). The Minister defends this position by claiming that "parents have said that they want real choices. We mean school boards developing a range of different types of schools or programs to meet individual student needs" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p.1).

The Ministry of Education sees choice as a way of making school boards and individual schools more accountable to parents. Their website states that "parents need to be given voice within their local schools, but they also need to be given the choice to opt in or opt out. Ultimately, parents and students must be allowed to vote with their feet if schools and boards are not performing and not improving student achievement" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 1). The Ministry's expectation appears to be that a parent's foremost concern for his or her child's education is their academic achievement and that moving students to more academically successful schools will force reluctant school boards to make changes that will have a positive effect on the achievement of all students. However, confusing a school's academic excellence

with its popular appeal is dangerous, particularly when school choice is being used as a means of making schools more accountable.

This use of parental choice as a measure of school accountability is particularly threatening for individual schools because of the Ministry of Education's "simplified" funding system. As explained on their website, "dollars will now follow students wherever they choose to go. And that has another, added advantage. Along with supporting choice, it gives every school an incentive to keep students; to hold their interest; to challenge them; to respond to their individual needs; and to keep them in school, to help ensure that they graduate" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 2). Another effect this might have is to penalize schools that are already struggling due to a variety of societal realities – students who arrive at school hungry, students who are abused or neglected or dealing with other emotional issues – and provide them with even fewer financial resources than the ones already available. The media release ends with "again – it all comes down to improving student achievement – the central focus of the entire education system" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 2). I wondered how central achievement truly is in the school choice debate.

### *Responses to the Ministry of Education's School Choice Agenda*

#### *The BC Principals' and Vice Principals' Association*

The B.C. Principals' and Vice Principals' Association protests that "in reality there is a great deal of choice within the school system" and "curriculum is continually under review to be sure it stays current and relevant for the world of today" ("BCPVPA: Advocates for Public Education", p. 2). They state on their website that "our association supports choice and alternatives within the public education system" as long as "programs are based on careful diagnosis of student needs, reflect sound principles of child development and learning, and



involve consultation among parents, school personnel and students where appropriate” (“BCPVPA: Advocates for Public Education”, p. 3).

### *The B.C. Teachers' Federation*

The B.C. Teachers' Federation believes that “school districts around B.C. have established a wide array of programs that respond to both educational and community needs” (“School Choice”, p. 2). The B.C.T.F. supports “diverse opportunities for learning that reflects the diverse population in our public schools” but believes that “the neighbourhood school is the heart of the community” (“School Choice”, p. 3). They are, therefore, unsupportive of the government's push to establish a system of magnet schools that are developed independent of initiatives from local school communities and which do not include input from the teachers who will implement the programs. They are particularly opposed to “vouchers, charter schools, and similar initiatives that privatize public schools and undermine the democratic principles upon which public schools are founded” (“School Choice”, p. 3). The official BCTF Policy on Alternatives Within Public Education states that the BCTF continues to support alternatives within the public education system to meet the diverse circumstances of students under a set of conditions. Among the concerns articulated by the BCTF are assurances that “they will be based on sound educational pedagogy, all students have equal access to the benefits of public education, all schools will have an equitable share of educational resources, schools will continue to offer an array of programs reflecting the diversity of the school population” (“School Choice”, p. 2-3).

### *The B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils and Parents*

Reggi Balabanov, former president of the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, says that “parents welcome the promise of more choice...our students need more

choices and we're starting to ask, 'Why not? Why can't we have that?' " (Steffenhagen, 2001, September 28, p. B 2). She has maintained the view that issues like class size are "not the primary concern of parents" (Steffenhagen, 2003, May 2, p. A2). This distancing of the BCCPAC from issues being put forward by the BCTF has "guaranteed Balabanov exceptional access to the minister" (Steffenhagen, 2003, May 2, p. A2) and has allowed the Minister of Education to claim that there is popular support for her position on school choice. Not all parents agree with the official position of the BCCPAC, however. The equity of delivering that choice, particularly in times of fiscal restraint has some parents questioning the use of scarce resources to provide enriched choices for the benefit of a few privileged students.

According to an article in the Vancouver Sun newspaper, "not all parents are clamouring for more choice" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B5). One mother is reported as complaining that "she wishes Vancouver school district would get rid of the 'mini schools' it established over the years to provide special programs for a few selected students and use that money, instead, to improve the educational experience for all" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B5). She says that even though her own children were enrolled in mini school programs, "because she couldn't deny them the opportunity for enriched education as long as it exists," she believes "Vancouver's mini schools are detrimental to the concept of public education because they give superior opportunities to a small number of students" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B5). From her experiences in the mini schools attended by her children she reports that "if you look into these mini schools and see what kind of special programs they have, it's pretty amazing compared to what kids are doing in the regular school system" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B5). Equity of access to magnet programs is even more of a concern during times when adequate funding of school programs is an issue.

## *School Boards*

There are a number of different approaches being taken to the issue of school choice, particularly among districts in the lower mainland. Surrey School Board has been one of the school boards that has shown the most support for the liberal government's school choice policy. In November, 1997, they adopted a policy "promoting excellence in instruction, optimal achievement and expanded choice for all students" ("School District #36", p. 1). A recent article in the Vancouver Sun reported that "Surrey is opening its third K-3 traditional school in September, although even that facility won't meet all the demand. It is preparing to open a second fine-arts school and has heard calls in the community for an aboriginal school" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B 5).

New Westminster School Board declared in February, 2001 that they were committed to "making program choices available to students whenever possible" ("School District #40", p. 1). They went on to address the issue of equitable access by stating that, after siblings of students already or previously enrolled in the program have been accepted, "the fairest way to allocate limited seats in Programs of Choice is through a lottery system" ("School District #40", p. 1). I was surprised to read this, given the recent news stories about parents who camped out overnight this spring in order to have a chance of enrolling their kindergarten children in the Board's French Immersion program.

Emery Dosdall was Superintendent of Schools with the Langley School Board prior to his going to Edmonton, so it is not surprising that "the Langley School District has a history of providing educational choices for students" ("School District #35", p. 1). The Vancouver Sun reports that "Langley plans to expand its Montessori offerings and an electronic-learning program that connects home-schoolers to schools. There continue to be extensive wait lists for traditional and fine-arts programs" (Steffenhagen, 2003, April 21, p. B 5).

In Vancouver, most students attend their neighbourhood secondary school. The Vancouver School Board has repeatedly responded to the call by the Ministry of Education for more educational choice by pointing out it already provides students with a variety of choices, including the District Specified Alternate Programs for Enrichment, French Immersion, Montessori, and many different programs which offer extra support for students at risk. It contends that "many schools have developed their own alternative programs for a wide range of student interests and abilities" ("Options 2003", p. 1). Among these are the twelve mini schools which are offered as district programs to meet the needs of "students who have demonstrated significantly high potential, talent and need for a challenging program in preparation for their post-secondary education" ("Options 2003", p. 1). Parents are advised that "each program offers course content that emphasizes acceleration or enrichment, and is distinct from courses at the neighbourhood school" ("Options 2003", p. 1).

### *High School Choices in Vancouver*

#### *Neighbourhood High Schools*

A brochure about Vancouver high school programs states that "most Grade 8 students will attend their neighbourhood school in September – and for good reasons, too! All 18 secondary schools in Vancouver offer challenging and comprehensive programs" ("Options 2003", p. 1). Neighbourhood high schools in Vancouver serve all students in their catchment area and require no special application procedure beyond course selection. Counselors from the high school meet with the Grade 7 teachers to bring them up to date with the programs and services available at the school and visit the elementary schools to help the students with their course selection. Students visit the high school for orientation to help them make the transition. There are meetings at each high school for the parents and information is sent home to help them

understand the articulation process from elementary to secondary school. The school board ensures that all parents have an opportunity to become informed about the high school in their neighbourhood.

### *District Specified Alternative Programs (Mini Schools)*

The twelve mini schools operated by the Vancouver School Board as District Specified Alternative Programs for Enrichment offer a variety of educational options. Although all are designated as programs for academic enrichment, they differ somewhat in their approach and definition of an enriched educational experience. Many, like Prince of Wales Mini School and Point Grey Mini School, stress extended field trip experiences as a feature of their program. The Byng Arts Mini School offers enriched instruction in fine arts. Britannia's Venture Program offers a combination of academic preparation for the International Baccalaureate program and a focus on cultural diversity. Many other mini schools offer students the opportunity to accelerate their coursework so that they can either graduate early or take Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses. All of these programs actively seek students who are motivated to achieve academic excellence.

Information about District Specified Alternative Programs is not distributed to all parents in the district. There are brochures available, if Grade 7 teachers hand them out them or parents know to ask the Grade 7 teacher about them. Parents can also inquire at the School Board or investigate for themselves on the internet. However, it is up to the teachers or the parents to ensure that this information is distributed. There is a meeting for each mini school in January, before the school's application deadline. However, the dates of these meetings are available only in the brochures, on the internet, and on signs at the school site. In order to attend a District Specific Alternative Program, there is a lengthy admission process which may include a written application form, letters of recommendation from teachers and others who know the child's

ability and motivation, a written admission exam, and a personal interview. Even so, there is more demand for placement in these programs than there are spaces available.

Other high school choices also exist in Vancouver. There are special programs to provide extra academic and emotional support, as well as programs for students at risk. French Immersion is another option that is available at the high school level in Vancouver.

### *Objectives of the Study*

The Ministry of Education in British Columbia encourages local school boards to expand the scope of educational choices offered to students in the public school system. However, there are concerns from many quarters about issues of equity as the boards begin to establish policies that will enable these choices to be made available. One of the concerns voiced by those who question the equity of school choice is that some families are more able to benefit from school choices than others. Bourdieu (1986) has argued that middle-class parents possess and use various linguistic and cultural competences that ensure their children's success in school. He called these competences cultural capital. The relative success of middle-class students in school may be due to the fact that many middle-class parents are more likely to have post-secondary education and understand the importance of certain courses within the secondary school that will enable their children to aspire to similar post-secondary opportunities. It may also be true that parents who work in more prestigious occupations have networks of business associates and acquaintances who can advise them concerning educational choices. These networks and the quality of the information they can provide Bourdieu called social capital.

My question is whether the District Specified Alternative Programs currently offered as educational choices for parents in Vancouver are chosen by a diverse group of parents in the district. Specifically, my study will examine two questions. Do parents in Vancouver who choose to apply to alternative programs differ from parents who send their child to the

neighbourhood high school, in terms of family residence, level of education, and occupational prestige? If there is a difference between these two groups of parents, could social or cultural capital -- the sources of information and the criteria that families use when deciding on an educational option -- explain this difference?

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 will provide a review of literature related to school choice and issues of equity, including evidence collected internationally that finds a disparity in the socioeconomic status of parents making school choices. Chapter 3 will describe my Research Design, including interviews with Grade 7 teachers, observations at high school meetings and the survey of parents of Grade 7 students. Chapter 4 will describe my research findings from interviews with Grade 7 teachers at two Vancouver elementary schools and observations at parent information nights for the District Specified Alternative Programs. Chapter 5 will summarize my research findings from the survey administered to parents of Grade 7 students making choices among high school options in Vancouver. Chapter 6 will summarize the conclusions and recommendations resulting from my analysis of the data provided by the interviews, observations, and survey.

## Chapter II – Literature Review

A significant number of studies show parental choice in education to be a widespread trend in western industrialized nations (Ambler, 1994; Whitty et al., 1998; Willms & Echols, 1997). Parental choice enables parents to choose, from a variety of educational options, the program that best suits the needs of their children. Yet research on school choice is extremely polarized on such concepts as private and public, market and democracy, freedom and equity, exit and voice. On both sides of the debate there are significant assumptions being made and research yet to be done.

### *On the Affirmative: The Case for Parental Choice -- and a Rebuttal*

Studies undertaken by Ambler (1994) and Whitty, Power, & Halpin (1998) document a worldwide movement toward policy reforms that empower parents to choose schools. Supporters of choice portray these reforms as a logical extension of the fact that parents' ability to choose among public school districts (through residential decisions) and to select private schools (by paying tuition) are already well-established options within the present catchment-bound school system (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Gaskell, 2001; Hassel, 1998; Hoxby, 1998).

Residential and private school choices, however, are not equally available to all families. Proponents of choice argue that the current, catchment-bound policies of most school districts suffer from an inability to produce equal outcomes, while restricting the choices of the least privileged -- families in poorer, inner-city schools who cannot afford private education and lack the resources or are the wrong colour to move to more desirable school districts (Gaskell, 2001; Hassel, 1998; Hoxby, 1998; Witte, 2000). Choice policies, they claim, can be specifically designed to target the inequality currently experienced by poorer families within the public school system. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, which provided private school



vouchers for qualified inner-city families, is frequently cited as one such innovative and equitable program. It is important to note, however, that when Witte studied the participants in the Milwaukee Program his research indicated that, although this choice program did target low-income families, those families that benefited from the choice tended to report having higher education levels than families that did not participate, indicating a privileging of some lower-income parents over others (Witte, 2000).

Proponents of parental choice often argue the advantages of a market approach to promote excellence and equity in education (Chubb & Moe, 1988; Hassel, 1998). When choice is introduced the neighbourhood school's monopoly is broken, and it is forced to compete with other schools for its students, much as private schools do. Thus, argue Chubb & Moe (1998), strong and effective schools will succeed and weaker schools will be forced either to adapt or close their doors, although their research does not investigate whether this claim is true.

These studies fail to address the effect that schools' recruitment of the "best" students (in order to make them appear "strong and effective") will have on "weaker" public schools. This "skimming" has been noted in a number of studies (Archbald, 1996; Lauder & Hughes, 1999; Metz, 1986; Whitty et al., 1998). Nor do supporters of choice question the discriminatory role played by oversubscribed schools in their selection of what they define as "desirable" students, as noted by Davis & Rimm (1994) and Schwartz (1994).

Breaking the monopoly enjoyed by catchment-bound schools is supposed to force all schools to become more responsive to parental concerns and create a more equal society. Chubb and Moe (1988) explain that the necessity for private schools to match supply and demand (lest they lose so many students they are no longer economically viable) gives more power and voice to parents and students in the governance of these schools. If parents do not like the school they are currently attending, they can exit and shop for a more agreeable option. Others argue that this exit option is more available to middle-class families than to working-class families. The

latter are more likely to be hampered by constraints of time and material resources, a lack of knowledge regarding the options that are available, and a less informed understanding of the possible future ramifications of their choices (Archbald, 1996; Ball, Bowe & Gewirtz, 1995; Whitty et al., 1998). Witte (2000) and Willms & Echols (1992) also point out that families that exit poorer schools because of their dissatisfaction with the school's performance tend to be the concerned and motivated parents that could most effectively work to improve those schools if they remained and use their "voice" rather than "exit" option.

Equity, argue some supporters of school choice, will be even further served by the mixing of previously-segregated students. Jay Greene (1998) states that "by attaching people's single largest asset, a house, to where their children go to school, public schools have made people even more cautious about mixing with other groups" (p. 92). He contends that American society will become less segregated as a result of freer parental choice. In this he assumes that choice would result in an equal flow between parents choosing schools in lower and higher socioeconomic areas. This is not reflected in international studies. In fact, just the opposite has been observed, with poorer schools being deserted by more motivated families and greater racial and class-related segregation resulting (Ambler, 1994; Willms & Echols, 1992).

Allowing parents to choose schools with a specific focus (Fine Arts, Gifted Education) is also posited as a means of promoting more cultural diversity (Greene, 1998; Hoxby, 1998). Greene believes that a school "devoted to emphasizing a certain subject or approach may allow people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to mix more easily because families can share their common devotion to that subject or approach" (p. 92). He does not address the question of equity in terms of socioeconomic status nor the effect that the "skimming" of gifted, talented, and motivated students might have on music and other enrichment programs in other public schools (Metz, 1986; Whitty et al., 1998).

Offering more options within the public school system is also viewed as a means of allowing families to choose schooling that more closely mirrors their family's cultural values. This, according to Greene (1998), "may help develop important civic values, such as tolerance, by creating the strong identity and self-esteem that are frequently associated with greater tolerance. Private schooling and school choice allow parents more easily to raise their children with their preferred identities and values" (p. 90). To critics like Waslander & Thrupp (1995), who suggest that such parental choice may exacerbate segregation, Greene (1998) offers his study which indicates that, when surveyed, private school students reported that they have more cross-racial friendships than do public school students. It may be significant that the majority of private schools represented in Greene's study have a religious affiliation that could promote tolerance of racial integration in a manner that American public schools with their strict separation of religion and state cannot imitate. It would be interesting to see how eliminating Catholic schools from this study would affect Greene's results. Hoxby (1998) agrees with Greene, although she admits to lacking empirical evidence, that "greater choice is also likely to make schools more culturally diverse through parents' influence--because like-minded parents will be better able to group together in sending their children to the same schools" (p. 151). She does not address the question of socioeconomic status in this integration of culturally diverse students, assuming an equal power of choice among all strata.

"The difficulty with public education", concludes Greene (1998), "is that it is provided using a "one-size-fits-none" approach" (p. 91). Other proponents concur that subjecting schools to the discipline of the market will force them to respond to parental demands. Enhancing parental choice, they claim, will achieve three goals: higher academic achievement, lower costs, and greater equality of opportunity (Chubb & Moe, 1988). These are the arguments that are convincing governments throughout the Western world, including the Liberal government in

British Columbia, to develop policies that make it easier for parents to choose schools that match what they perceive to be the educational needs of their children.

*On The Negative: Questions of Class and Cultural Capital -- and a Rebuttal*

Equality of opportunity is a common refrain among supporters of school choice. At last, the argument goes, we will have a system that will give low-income students the same freedom to choose schools that has always existed among upper-middle-class families. Yet studies of these parental choice options reveal quite a different trend. As Ambler (1994) explains, in practice "choice among schools tends to reinforce the hierarchical distribution of schools and to intensify the segregation of social classes. Working-class children tend to stay in the academically weaker schools, while middle-class children tend to desert them" (p. 363). This inequality by class also appears to be a world-wide trend, as noted in a significant number of studies (Ambler, 1994; Archbald, 1996; Ball et al., 1995; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Metz, 1986; Schwartz, 1994; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995; Whitty et al., 1998; Willms & Echols, 1997).

In England, the "assisted-place" program was seen to privilege relatively well educated mothers who encouraged their children to succeed academically and who actively researched to discover the "best" educational opportunities. Moreover, Ambler (1994) noted that, since middle class and working class families may have different priorities when seeking educational opportunities for their children, the primary beneficiary of schools of choice appeared to be "the fallen middle class rather than the rising working class" (p. 367). This mirrors Witte's (2000) study of the Milwaukee Program.

In Scottish studies, Willms and Echols (1997) found that "parents who exercised their right to choose a school other than their designated school tended to be more highly educated and have more prestigious occupations than those who did not" (p. 428). The Dutch Ministry of

Education observed, in 1991, that choice worked better for the well-educated parents who had more information and were better able to operate within the system (Ambler, 1994).

Hepburn (1999) contends that, in New Zealand, locally-managed charter schools are “more innovative, focused, energetic, and responsive to the needs of students” (p. 3). However, other research has indicated that discrimination on the basis of social background and ethnicity has kept many lower-class and Maori children in less desirable schools. While students in the most prestigious schools do indeed flourish, those remaining in less desirable schools fall behind. Waslander & Thrupp (1995) concluded that socioeconomic segregation actually intensified when schools operated in a free-choice, open-market context. This seems to be an inherent problem in choice systems. Too often, allowing parents more power to choose has privileged relatively affluent and well-educated parents who are more likely than poor parents to have the time and knowledge to take advantage of local school choice. Walford (1994) explains that

various parents make choices differently. Those families that highly value education are likely to take an active interest in school choice for their children – they will seek out information, examine prospectuses and examination results, visit schools and talk with headteachers and teachers. For them, the decision is too important to be left with the child. Those parents who value education less highly are less likely to be concerned about which school their child attends – they will be less likely to compare schools and weigh their differences. They will give more weight to the child’s view or let the child decide (p. 123).

Too often, proponents of choice assume that all parents will make a particular school choice primarily based upon academic or educational criteria. In practice, parents consider many factors other than academic achievement. Ungerleider (2003) warns that “although some have claimed that parents will rationally seek to maximize educational benefits for their children by exercising the opportunity to choose the schools their children attend, the research indicates that

parents choose schools on other grounds" (p. 194). A study by Petch (1986), of parents of students about to enter secondary schools indicated that parents were less concerned with educational content or teaching method than they were with the child's happiness, the child's preference, and the perceived level of discipline at the school. While virtually all parents take into account their child's happiness as part of their school choice criteria, Walford warns that

in terms of equity, the greatest concern is that some social groups and ethnic minorities may be more likely to leave the decision of choice of school to their child or to be more influenced by their child's wishes. As children are more likely to make their decisions on short-term criteria, this may lead to a marked difference in the distribution of pupils according to social class and ethnicity. Where some parents may encourage (or force) their children to apply for schools where they will have to face the ordeal of being interviewed, others will allow them to simply attend the school where the bulk of their friends will go. A hierarchy of schools will develop where those who recognize the prize of educational success will battle in the competitive market to try to get places at the highly valued schools, while others will retreat into the security of their local schools (p. 122).

There appears to be a class difference in the criteria used when making school choices. Walford (1994) compares one study, which described how working class parents made school choices, with two studies in which middle-class parents were choosing schools. He writes that "in the first study good discipline was given as the most important reason for school choice, while the quality of education/academic excellence was rated highest in the other two studies" (p. 120). Walford also explains that "the system of choice on which the educational system is now based presupposes a set of values which give primacy to comparison, mobility and long-term planning, and ignores those cultures which give primacy to the values of community and locality" (p. 121).

Bourdieu (1986) formalized what he perceived as a middle-class advantage of knowledge and attitudes in his theory of cultural capital. Andres (1994) explains that "cultural capital is considered to be a key mechanism in the reproduction of the dominant culture through which background inequalities are converted into differential academic attainments and hence rewards" (p. 123). Bourdieu suggests that "the more the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital in the form of cultural capital become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure" (p. 55). In terms of parental choice, this means that although, ostensibly, choice is offered equally to all families, in practice it may create a two-tier education system split along socioeconomic lines.

Ambler (1994) contends that the gap in information between relatively well-educated parents and parents with less formal education explains much of the class difference in the exercising of parental choice options. Henig (1999) suggests that "minorities and less-well-educated parents depend on information networks of poorer quality; they talk to fewer people about schools, and those they talk to are more likely to be relatives and less likely to have a college education" (p. 75). Lareau (1989) agrees that "working-class people have fewer contacts with educated people who can provide them with helpful hints, suggestions, or information about how schools work. The usual semi-annual conferences are inadequate for giving parents this information without the use of other avenues" (p. 182). Others concur that middle-class parents are more likely to have access to the networks that provide information relevant to the school placement of their child, such as test results and knowledge of curricular options, while socioeconomically disadvantaged parents tend not to have this information or to recognize its significance (Archbald, 1996; Lauder & Hughes, 1999).

When choosing educational options, Andres (1994) explains that "one of the most valuable types of information transmitted by inherited cultural capital is practical or theoretical knowledge of current and future worth of academic qualifications" (p. 125). Those without the

cultural capital to understand the relative value of academic qualifications or the social capital to gain access to information are at a disadvantage in an system that expects parents to choose wisely from a variety of educational choices. Bourdieu's theory helps to explain why the opportunity to choose among educational options seems frequently to benefit middle-class rather than lower-class families. Lauder & Hughes (1999) believe their study shows that (a) knowledge is distributed unevenly among individuals according to age, gender, social, and ethnic group and (b) those groups that occupy privileged social positions also have the symbolic power to decide what is culturally valuable as explained in Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986).

In the United States, three of the most popular school choice movements are charter schools, educational vouchers, and magnet schools. The last choice is the most relevant to this study, as the District Specified Alternative Programs function in many respects like magnet schools. Magnet school programs can be designed so that they are particularly accessible to low-income and disadvantaged children in an attempt to improve their educational outcomes. Studies have shown, however, that if these schools are allowed to select their students, using criteria favouring middle-class students rather than a random lottery system, they create a more segregated school system.

This inequality has been noted in two studies made on culturally diverse and low socioeconomic status gifted students (Davis & Rimm, 1994; Schwartz, 1994). Both studies concurred that, because of the middle-class values and testing instruments that define "gifted students", American minority students (Black, Latino, Asian, Native), poorer students, rural students, and handicapped students are frequently excluded from gifted programs, thereby eliminating these choices for those students and their families. Thus, a primary negative effect of school choice can be its tendency to increase the educational gap between the privileged, who define what is valuable knowledge, and the underprivileged. "Choice," as Walford (1994)



explains, "is a socially and culturally constructed concept which has different meanings to different families. Government policy is predicated on a consumerist vision that is embraced by the middle class" (p. 121).

The question that is often not addressed in anti-choice studies is whether students are better or worse off than they would have been in a catchment-bound school. Levin (2000) has developed a Framework for Evaluating Educational Vouchers, which could be employed to evaluate other methods of providing choice. Work in this area is still needed. Are the increased opportunities for some working class students to be eliminated in order to maintain a status quo that would leave these students with no options at all (Gaskell, 2001; Hoxby, 1998)? Is there an alternate model of choice to that offered by the market that could simultaneously provide opportunities for motivated students and ensure that all parents and students in the system benefited from increased power to demand choices that meet their needs? Are working class parents really as unmotivated and uninformed as some of the studies by Ball et al. (1995) and Willms & Echols (1992) suggest or do they merely appear so from the perspective of a middle-class researcher? I have yet to encounter a study asking working class parents (or students of any class) what they want from schools and under what conditions they might make choices.

*The Dilemma: How do Parental Choice and Equity co-exist in Vancouver?*

In the polemic philosophical debate around parental choice then, advocates contend that the elimination of the catchment-bound school monopoly provides more choices and opportunities for students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. They explain that, as publicly-funded institutions, these schools cannot deny access to any student and cannot charge tuition, thus ensuring equity of access in a manner that cannot be achieved by the more traditional choices of residing within a school catchment or attending an elite and costly private school.

Opponents argue that school choice options are not equally accessible to those families who do not possess the cultural or social capital to research and pursue these options, thus privileging middle-class students. Despite legislation designed to prohibit discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic status or ability, opponents contend that informal practices, like targeting particular students (e.g. “gifted” or “learners with unique learning styles”), lack of subsidized transportation, or high expectations of parental involvement in particularly desirable schools discourage or exclude some families (Metz, 1986).

Much of this philosophical debate takes place at a highly theoretical and generalized level. Recent research tries to step away from the polarized debate to ask what kinds of provision of choices, under what conditions, benefit whom. It was from my reading of this literature that I decided to conduct a study that would gather data from parents making high school choices in Vancouver. Specifically, I was interested in determining if the inequality noted in studies around the world is found in the system of choice currently available in Vancouver, as represented by the District Specified Alternative Programs – the mini schools. If so, could differences in cultural and social capital help explain the phenomenon and how could their effects be lessened?

### *Research Questions Arising from the Literature*

The literature suggests that unless school choice programs are specifically targeted towards lower-class families, schools that are accessible by parental choice will tend to attract a disproportionate number of families with a higher socioeconomic status (as defined by family income, prestige of parental occupation, and level of formal education attained by the parent). In part, this is theorized as being the result of a disparity in social and cultural capital between middle-class and working-class parents. Social capital includes the networks and other sources of information available to the parent. Cultural Capital is the parent’s ability to evaluate the educational option that will best facilitate their child’s future educational and occupational goals

This reading of the literature raised the question of whether, and in what ways, there are differences among parents in Vancouver who choose to apply to alternative programs (mini schools) and parents who send their child to the neighbourhood high school. Was the socioeconomic disparity noted in other studies replicated in Vancouver? If so, could this be attributable to a difference in social and cultural capital? I expected to find differences both between the west side and east side schools and within the parent community at each school.

Most of the literature investigating school choice deals with the issue from the perspective of the impact that parental choice has on individual schools and the school system as a whole. Little voice has been given to the parents who are supposedly demanding and being empowered by these choices. I wanted to examine, using the parents' perspective, differences that exist among parents in Vancouver who choose alternatives within the public education system and those who either do not choose or who, perhaps, choose not to choose those alternatives.

### Chapter III – Research Design

As parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver consider public high school options for their sons and daughters, they are presented with several choices. Recent legislation, opening catchment boundaries throughout the province, mandates a wider range of choices than ever before. In reality, however, it is difficult to cross from one catchment area to another, as schools have increased class sizes to deal with on-going budget deficits and the most desirable schools have declared themselves to be full. Many students, therefore, enroll in their neighbourhood high school. Others, seeking a wider choice of high school options, apply to the District Specific Alternative Programs, designed to provide enrichment for academically able, creative, and motivated students in order to enroll in the most desirable high schools. Ostensibly, choice is limited only by parents' and students' motivation to learn about and apply for these programmes.

The District Specified Alternative Programs in Vancouver are open to all students in the district and the school board has located these programs throughout the district, ensuring that there are programs easily accessible to lower-income students within their neighbourhood school. Although these students are not specifically targeted for educational choices, it is possible that providing programs in less affluent schools will help equalize educational opportunities for those students living closer to these schools. At the same time, however, there is a lengthy application procedure for these schools, including academic testing and interviews with the teachers, which may dissuade many disadvantaged students from applying to the programs or from successfully being accepted into one of the alternative programs.

Schools offering enriched choices may provide an educational advantage to students enrolled in these programs, in relation to students in more comprehensive high school programmes, and they would benefit a cross-section of qualified students. I assume they should be expected to serve a cross-section of students and not over-represent any particular group. The

Vancouver School board's locating of alternative programs throughout the district indicates an awareness that such selective schools might be open to charges of elitism, particularly if they were to be situated only on the more affluent west side of the city. Individual schools also indicate that they are concerned with addressing questions of equity. Prince of Wales Mini School advertises that "every effort is made to ensure that each Grade 8 class is balanced, based upon gender and representation from a broad range of elementary schools" ("Prince of Wales Mini School", p. 1). Education Minister Christy Clark claims that "if such schools were located in poorer neighbourhoods, children would have equal access" (Steffenhagen, 2001, Sept. 27, p. A1).

Do parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver who choose to apply to District Specific Alternative Programs differ from parents who send their children to the neighbourhood high school? Specifically, I was interested in differences that might occur among the following variables:

Was family residence a significant factor in determining which parents choose alternative programs? Were parents residing on the more-affluent West Side of Vancouver more likely than parents in less-affluent neighbourhoods in Vancouver to apply to alternative programs and which programs did they choose?

Did parents with more formal education tend to apply to alternative programs more frequently than those with less formal education? The range of parental education included those who did not complete high school, those who had a high school diploma, those with some post-secondary training, those with a university undergraduate degree, and those with a graduate or professional degree. I was also interested in examining the context of the parents' education (public or private, North American or foreign) in case this was a significant factor.

Was a difference in access to information a significant factor for parents who chose or did not choose alternative programs for their children? Where and how did parents obtain

information about school choices in Vancouver? Was official information distributed by the school board to all parents in the district? What networks or sources of information did parents actually use and were these available to all parents living in all areas of Vancouver?

Did parents who choose alternative programs differ from parents who send their children to the neighbourhood school in the criteria they consider when making their choice? Did middle-class parents use the same criteria as working-class parents? Did parents in different professions differ in the educational choices they make for their children? Did the choices offered by the alternative programs seem to suit one class of parents and their children more than another? What role did the students and their peers play in making educational choices and was there any difference between middle and working-class families in this respect? I studied this question using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

First, I interviewed Grade 7 teachers at Westview Elementary School, on the west side of the city, and Eastling Elementary School, on the east side. The focus of these interviews was to explore which high school programs tended to attract parents in each school and to understand the teachers' roles in providing information about high school programs. I also attended parent information meetings for several of the District Specified Alternative Programs throughout the district to observe what information is provided to parents and the questions asked by parents at these meetings.

In February, I administered a questionnaire to parents of Grade 7 students at the two elementary schools, as they were in the process of choosing a high school program. I asked them to provide both demographic information (occupation, level of education) and information about how they arrived at their school decision (the sources of information they used to learn about their options and the criteria used to make their decision). I expected that this survey would help define those attributes which may distinguish parents in Vancouver who choose to apply to alternative programs from those who do not.

When the data were collected, I analyzed the results to determine if there were demographic variables that distinguish parents who choose alternative programmes from those who register in their neighbourhood high school. This was designed to answer the question: Is the socioeconomic disparity, which has been noted in other studies between parents exercising choice and those who do not, also apparent in Vancouver?

Finally, I used the information provided by the parents to ascertain whether parents who chose alternative programs used different sources of information or criteria than parents who did not make this choice when considering their child's high school options. In studying this information, I addressed the question: If a socioeconomic disparity becomes apparent between these two groups of parents, could this be attributable to a difference in social or cultural capital? Results were then compared to other studies, to ascertain whether they supported or contradicted the findings of this research.

### *Selecting a Sample – Grade 7 Parents*

I had several options when deciding how to approach this study. I could have contacted the District Specified Alternative Programs directly and tried to collect information from the parents of students actually registering in these schools. This would have necessitated obtaining permission from the school board to survey these parents and would have required the compliance of the mini schools and the parents. I was unsure whether I would be granted access to this group of parents, as access is more difficult at schools with a higher socioeconomic status. I was also uncertain how much this would really tell me about parental choice. These students are the chosen, but do not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of students seeking to make choices in the public school system. I was more interested in the dynamics of making a decision to apply to a program, whether or not the child was successful in gaining admittance to the school of their choice.

I decided not to survey Grade 7 students because I reasoned that choices at this age are likely made predominately by the parents, albeit with student input. I also worried about the information children would give about their parents' level of education and occupational status. So I decided to conduct my research at the level of parents of Grade 7 students who were considering high school options for their children.

Initially, I proposed studying eighteen elementary schools – one feeder school to each of the secondary schools in the city. Due to practical considerations of time and resources, I was wisely advised to restrict my study to just two elementary schools. However, I was interested in surveying as wide a spectrum of parents as I could, so I chose two schools on opposite sides of the city. I hoped to include parents with a variety of levels of education and occupations, in order to evaluate any differences which might differentiate those parents who choose to make an application to an alternative program and those that opt for the neighbourhood school. I also selected schools with approximately the same population of Grade 7 students, although it turned out that my east-side school had an unusually high number of Grade 7 students this year.

### *Elementary Schools Participating in the Survey*

I selected two elementary schools -- one from the west side of Vancouver and one from the east side – after comparing their descriptions on the Vancouver School District website. I expected the geographic location of these two schools to provide a contrast in income, education level of the parents, parental occupation, and school culture (e.g. networks of information available to parents and high school programs typically chosen). But there were important similarities between the two schools. There were approximately the same number of students at each school, and the Grade 7 students at both schools had the option of attending a mini school program within the high school in their catchment area.



Early in September, after contacting the Vancouver School Board (Appendix A) and receiving their permission, I approached two elementary school principals (Appendix B) to ask if I might be permitted to speak with their Grade 7 teachers about the high school selection process at the school and then survey parents of Grade 7 students to inquire about the high school choices they were making with their child. The principal I approached at the school on the east side of the city agreed without hesitation and was very interested in the study. She had some suggestions for enhancing the success of my survey, such as offering students an incentive for returning the surveys. On the west side of the city, it was much more difficult to gain administrative support. The principal at the first school I approached was very cautious about the idea of involving parents in the school in a survey and, when the parents were consulted, they decided not to participate. I then approached a second school, where the teachers, and not the parents, were asked to decide whether they would participate in the study. Fortunately, the two Grade 7 teachers were very supportive. The two elementary schools are described below.

#### *Westview Elementary School*

I have called the school on the west side of the city Westview School. It is situated in an attractive neighbourhood in Point Grey. Students from this school are in the catchment area for Lord Byng Secondary School. At Lord Byng there is the Lord Byng Fine Arts Mini School program which is well-known in the neighbourhood. My interview with the Grade 7 teacher indicated that this school has well-educated parents who are actively engaged in all aspects of their children's education, including the selection of an appropriate high school program. Westview had a population in 2001-2002 of more than four hundred and fifty students. Programs at the school include academic "teams", including Destination Imagination, the National Math Contest and a Lego-Dacta program. One of the district's String Programs is on-site and is included in the school timetable, in addition to the school's Intermediate Music

program. There are also extra-curricular teams in volleyball, basketball and cross-country. Parent volunteers are active throughout the school. It is a school in which the Grade 7 students perform well above the district average on the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA)<sup>1</sup> and which received a high satisfaction rating from students and a medium satisfaction rating from the parents on the 2002 Provincial Satisfaction Survey.

### *Eastling Elementary School*

I named the school on the east side of the city Eastling School, after the school my grandmother attended in England. This sprawling school is located in an attractive east-side Vancouver neighbourhood, close to the Burnaby border. The neighbourhood high school for students at Eastling School is Killarney Secondary School. There is a mini school at Killarney, which caters primarily to students in the Killarney catchment, despite the district's policy that mini schools are equally available to all students in the district. The Killarney Mini School is a popular program for students in the area. The Grade 7 teachers informed me that, although parents at this school are very supportive of teachers and interested in their children's education, there are differences among them in their understanding of and appreciation for the variety of high school programs available

In 2001-2002 Eastling had a diverse multi-ethnic, multi-lingual population of five hundred students. Programs at the school include pull-out enrichment programs, in the form of twelve-week mini-workshops to extend skills in writing, literature analysis, problem solving, design, and artistic expression. Through the Artist-in-Residence program, two artists each year work with classes to offer special opportunities in Music, Drama, Art, and Dance. There are also extra-curricular activities, including inter and intra mural sports, chess and art clubs, choir and

---

<sup>1</sup> The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) is a standardized test of reading, writing, and numeracy given annually to students in Grades 4, 7, and 10 in British Columbia schools.

strings. Parents at this school actively support curricular and extra curricular activities. It is a school in which the Grade 7 students perform at or below the district average on the Foundation Skills Assessment but which received a high satisfaction rating from both students and parents on the 2002 Provincial Satisfaction Survey.

### *Characteristics of the Grade 7 Teacher Interview Population*

There were two Grade 7 teachers at Westview. Shelagh had been teaching for twelve years and had taught at two other Vancouver schools, as well as Westview. Anne had taught for thirteen years and had also taught at two other Vancouver schools. Both teachers had taught Grade 7 at the school for about four years. They were team-teaching the sixty-two Grade 7 students, sharing responsibility for various curricular areas. Shelagh had two children, who attended a French immersion school. Anne had two preschool children and was currently researching which elementary school program she would choose for her kindergarten child. As parents, both these teachers actively practiced school choice, although their children had not yet made the transition to high school.

There were two Grade 7 teachers and one Grade 6/7 teacher at Eastling. Tina had been teaching for seven years in a variety of schools throughout Vancouver and had been at Eastling for four years. Maureen had taught at several Vancouver schools for twelve years and had been a teacher at Eastling for eight years. Sharon had been teaching for sixteen years, also at a number of schools on the east and west side of Vancouver, and had been at Eastling for two years. Neither Tina nor Sharon had children. Maureen had a teenage daughter attending her neighbourhood school in New Westminster; she seemed to be most in tune with anxieties expressed by parents when sending their first child to high school and was the most proactive about informing students and parents about the options that are available at Killarney.

### *Interviews with Grade 7 Teachers*

I arranged to interview the teachers at Westview before school one morning in the last week before the Christmas break. When I arrived at the school at 8:00 a.m., one of the teachers was absent. I met with the other one, and we spoke for approximately forty-five minutes. She was able to answer questions for both teachers, due to the fact that they teach the sixty-two Grade 7 students as a team.

My interview with the three Grade 7 teachers at Eastling took place after school, in the first week after the Christmas break. Their meeting with me at this time was incredibly generous, given that they had also attended a 7:45 a.m. breakfast meeting with the counselors, teachers and administrators at the high school to discuss the articulation process. We spoke for about one hour.

At both of these interviews, I used prepared questions (Appendix D). The first questions provided details about their teaching experience and whether or not they themselves had children. I included the latter inquiry because it occurred to me that my advice to the parents of Grade 7 students in my class changed after my own children were in high school and I had some firsthand knowledge about the various options that were available. I wondered if this might be true for other teachers. Then I asked about the school community: the high schools that students typically go to; how they learn about the neighbourhood high school and other options; what teachers tell parents about the programs. Finally, I asked the teachers to describe the parents in terms of their involvement in the elementary school, their advocacy on behalf of their children, the information they seek from teachers, and the networks that teachers believe they use to research school programs that are available in Vancouver. Their responses to these questions are in Chapter Four.

### *Parent Information Nights at the Mini Schools*

For two weeks, from January 14 – January 31, I attended eight of the parent information nights offered by the mini school programs throughout the city. At these meetings, I observed the parents as they arrived and noted any comments they made about their impressions of the programs. During the presentation by each mini school, I compared what each program offered students, the apparent educational philosophy, the benefits and costs of each program, and the selection process as described by the presenters, both staff and students. Then I noted the questions being asked by parents to try to ascertain what hopes and concerns they had and how they were comparing the various programs around the district. By the eighth meeting, I was starting to recognize other parents and their children; I was not the only one attending a number of mini school information meetings. These observations are recorded in Chapter Four.

### *Characteristics of the Grade 7 Parent Survey Population*

Teachers at Westview characterized parents at the school as very well-educated and informed about educational programs for their children. Although the teachers were in constant contact with parents throughout the year, these parents were less dependent on the teachers' assessments of their child in relation to the options available to them. A former teacher at this school described these parents as very influential in school decision-making. They were equally pro-active when defending educational options like the String Program, which they valued, or questioning administrative decisions with which they disagreed.

Parents at Eastling were described as more highly educated than other east-side schools in which the teachers had taught. There was some discussion among the teachers as to how involved most parents were in their child's education, although parents were always respectful towards teachers and supportive of the school in general. The large number of parents for whom

English is not a first language was cited as a possible reason for the relatively low turnout to the Parent Advisory Council and might be responsible for what one teacher seemed to feel was a lack of initiative. Further details of the education and occupations of both groups of parents are contained in the research findings and analysis in Chapter Five.

### *Surveys Administered to Grade 7 Parents*

The survey used in this study (Appendix E) was divided into four sections. The first set of questions was intended to identify the high school(s) parents were considering for their child. One question asked them to list all schools to which they had applied. I also asked specifically whether they had applied to any of a list of mini school programs. This section was used to differentiate between the parents who chose a District Specified Alternative Program (or another option) and those who chose the neighbourhood high school.

The second section dealt with Sources of Information About High School Programs. I listed fourteen possible sources of information and asked parents to indicate for each source whether they Strongly Disagreed, Disagreed, Agreed, or Strongly Agreed that it was influential when they were making decisions about high school options. I also gave parents an opportunity to indicate any other sources of information that helped them reach a decision.

In the third section I listed thirty-four criteria that parents might consider when evaluating a high school program for their child and asked parents to indicate whether each criterion was Not at all Important, Somewhat Important, Very Important, or Extremely Important in their decision-making. There was also space for them to comment further on the criteria that they felt were most important.

Finally, I asked parents to indicate where they themselves attended high school, the highest level of education they had completed, what occupation they usually had, and what language was spoken in their home. This section provided the demographic information that I

used to evaluate whether or not there is a difference between parents who choose District Specified Alternative Programs and those that choose the neighbourhood high school.

For the most part, I was pleased with the information the survey provided. One section that I would alter, however, is the "Sources of Information About High School Programs". After some discussion and a great deal of thought, I provided parents with fourteen statements, to which they responded with one of the following: Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Agree; or Strongly Agree. An earlier version of the questionnaire also included "Does Not Apply". I took this option out on the final version, after being advised that if a parent did not use a source like the internet, they would indicate that they "Strongly Disagree" with the statement "The internet was a valuable source of information about programs". In filling out the survey, however, several parents either left this statement blank or wrote that it did not apply to them. If I were to reuse this questionnaire, I would reinstate the "Does Not Apply" option. I would also, at the end of the "Criteria for Choosing a High School" section, ask parents to list their top three (or five) criteria. Several parents spontaneously did this in the space provided for them to write any other considerations and I found this extra information interesting.

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

The surveys were colour coded, to differentiate between the two schools and to evaluate whether volunteer bias resulted in a larger percentage of returns from one school than the other. I also used a different font on the envelopes in which the questionnaires were returned in order to track returns from each of the five teachers' classes. Other than these colour codes and differentiated envelope labels, the questionnaires were anonymous. I was assured that translations of the questionnaire should not be necessary, as all parents either have access to translators or are fluent enough in English to understand and fill out the questionnaire. This may

not have been true, as indicated by some of the answers received on the surveys and the conversations I had with some parents after the surveys were collected.

I had originally planned to hand out my surveys in the schools during the first week of February, right after the January 31<sup>st</sup> application deadline for all of the District Specified Alternative Programs. This was also immediately after the students had written the district-administered Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills, a requirement of all applicants to a mini school program. I hoped to obtain the parents' feedback on their school choices after their application was complete but before the students had begun the individual selection processes administered by each mini school. I also wanted to have my responses returned before students began to hear, on Friday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, whether they were going to be offered a spot at one of the mini schools. I felt that, once students were no longer hopeful about being accepted into the programs to which they had applied, they might not wish to share the fact that they had made an unsuccessful application.

My scheduled distribution of the surveys was delayed, however, because the Parent Satisfaction Surveys were handed out to parents of Grade 4 and 7 students during that same first week of February. I postponed the distribution of my survey until the third week in February, by which time I assumed the Parent Satisfaction Surveys would have been filled out and returned. The distribution and collection of my surveys was done by the principal at Eastling and the teachers at Westview. While both schools were conscientious about reminding students to return their surveys, neither wished to send a reminder notice. Another time, I would try harder to send a reminder to the parents, as it might have resulted in a higher return rate. I collected all the returned surveys in the second week of March, before students began to hear about their placements for September.

At Eastling, the principal called all the Grade 7 students together and explained that this survey was to go home to their parents but that the students could assist them if necessary with



translating and filling them out. Students returning a survey would receive a pencil from the principal. She handed out the surveys to all the Grade 7 students during the third week in February. Of eighty-two surveys distributed, thirty-six (44%) were returned.

At Westview, the two teachers handed out the surveys to their own classes during the third week in February. They, too offered a pencil to students returning a survey and were surprised at how enthusiastic the students were about this simple incentive. Out of sixty-two surveys distributed, thirty-one (50%) were returned, but one was not completely filled out and could not be used in the analysis. Although the return rate was moderately low, I was pleased to have approximately the same number and percentage of surveys returned from both schools. I attribute the lower percentage of surveys returned from Eastling, in part, to the larger population of parents for whom English is not a first language. It is possible that I received a disproportionate number of surveys from non-immigrants or more highly-educated parents at this school. However, when I analyzed the results of the surveys from Eastling, there were a number of families (72%) who reported that English is not the language normally spoken at home and several (36%) who indicated that they had no post-secondary education. The data must, of course, be treated with caution, but they provide valuable information.

When the surveys were returned, I separated them according to which school they represented and whether the parent chose a District Specified Alternative Program or the neighbourhood high school. Those who chose neither public school alternatives nor the neighbourhood school (e.g. they chose a private school or were crossing school catchment areas) were included with the parents who made choices other than the neighbourhood school.

### *Data Organization and Analysis*

I entered the data into Excel because it was immediately available to me and I found it easy to become familiar with the program. Using the spreadsheet, I coded the responses to the

survey questions, as explained in Chapter 5, then analyzed the results by tabulating the responses given by the parents to each question. I chose to do this analysis myself because I felt I would be more aware of patterns as they developed if I were personally involved in the tabulation and analysis of the data.

I first compared these two options -- choosing an alternative program and attending the neighbourhood high school -- according to family residence (west side or east side of the city), level of education and occupation of mothers and fathers. Then I considered the sources of information and criteria that parents indicated they used when selecting a high school.

I also made a follow-up call to the two schools, once students knew for sure whether or not they had been accepted into a mini school program or another private school option to record the high school programs they will be attending in September, 2003. This information is also recorded in Chapter Five.

Originally I planned to follow up the survey with interviews of parents who volunteered to share with me their experiences in making school choices. On the survey, I invited parents to fill in their name and phone number if they were willing to be contacted after the survey was complete. Two parents from Westview and ten from Eastling, all of whom chose to apply to the neighbourhood school, did indicate that they were willing to be interviewed. Unfortunately, when I tried to arrange to meet with these parents, it proved very difficult to organize a time and space for these meetings. Had I been conducting this study in Burnaby, rather than Vancouver, I believe it might have been easier to negotiate using the school as a meeting place. I also had difficulty communicating with several of the parents responding from Eastling and wondered if some of them really understood what they were volunteering for when they filled in their name and phone number. Fortunately, many parents wrote comments on their surveys and I finally decided, a little regretfully, to use this feedback, rather than conducting interviews.

### *Ethical Considerations and Credibility (Survey Bias)*

I received permission for the study from the Ethics Committee at the University of British Columbia. I also secured permission from the Vancouver School Board, as well as the elementary school administrators, teachers, and parents at each school. In these approvals, I promised to ensure the confidentiality of participants in the survey. I also offered to share my analysis of the data at the end. I plan to write a summary of my findings for the two schools which participated and the Vancouver School Board. I will also submit a one-page summary of my research to the Office of Graduate Programs and Research, in partial fulfillment of the terms of a research grant given to me by the University of B.C.

I cannot know how representative the parents who replied to my survey are, compared to those in the school who did not reply. However, the information I was given concerning which high schools these students will be attending in September did not differ significantly from the data I collected about the school applications that parents were making. Because of the selective nature of the Mini Schools, they may not be representative of other school choice options, like the magnet schools elsewhere that are available by a lottery system, and would certainly not represent programmes, like the Milwaukee voucher program, that are specifically targeted towards needy students. Nevertheless, this study provides some information about how adequately the Vancouver School Board has addressed the issue of equity of access to its alternative programmes and Mini Schools, in its advertising of these options and as a result of locating them throughout Vancouver. It may also indicate whether the Minister of Education is correct in her assertion that "if [magnet] schools were located in poorer neighbourhoods, children would have equal access" (Vancouver Sun, Sept. 27, p. A1).

## Chapter IV – Research Findings from Interviews and Observations

Before administering the survey to parents in the two elementary schools, I explored the culture of each school in interviews with the Grade 7 teachers. These interviews helped me to interpret the data parents provided on the surveys. I also attended eight of the parent information nights at the mini schools, in order to gain a better understanding of the process of choice and the programs parents in Vancouver are offered through these schools. This chapter describes the qualitative part of my study of high school choice.

### *The Teacher Interviews*

In order to understand the context in which parents at the two elementary schools were making high school choices, I arranged an interview with the Grade 7 teachers at each of the schools. My intention was to get the teachers' impressions of the school culture, including the involvement that parents had in their children's education while at elementary school, the networks of information that were available and used by parents at each school, and the choices parents typically made when selecting high schools. I also wanted to understand how information about high school programs is passed on to parents by the teachers, the high school, the district, or other sources. Finally, I hoped to determine the teachers' own feelings about the high school choices that are offered to parents in Vancouver. I wanted to know who they felt these programs were most likely to benefit and how they promoted them with their students and their parents. I also wanted to understand, from their perspectives, how high school choices are made at their school. These interviews painted a picture of two very different school communities.

### *Westview Elementary School*

The Grade 7 teacher at Westview School stated that parents have very high standards in terms of their children's education. She expected that, "out of sixty kids, there will be twenty that will apply [to alternative programs] and for Byng Arts, there will be at least twenty-five to thirty". Had she been correct in her prediction, as many as 50% of her students would have chosen educational alternatives. From her perspective, choosing educational options is important at Westview. Based on my data, she only slightly overestimated the number of parents involved in choice. Half of the parents at Westview returned the survey and, of these, 43% indicated that they were choosing options other than Lord Byng.

One thing she did not tell me, because I did not ask, was that a significant number of students at Westview had already crossed a school catchment boundary in order for their child to attend Westview, rather than their neighbourhood elementary school. This became significant when four families indicated on their surveys that they were sending their children to high schools other than Lord Byng. The first time I analyzed my data, I decided to include these parents with the group that chose alternatives to the neighbourhood high school, thinking that, although they were not applying to a District Specified Alternative Program, they were making a choice other than the neighbourhood high school. However, these students were actually returning to their neighbourhood school as they made the transition to high school. If I were to repeat the study, one of the questions on the questionnaire would be whether the child was attending their neighbourhood elementary school.

Anne commented that parents "are advocates for their kids" and that "in this school there are very few kids whose parents are not right at the forefront". When asked about choices parents make, she answered that "there's Point Grey, there's Kits, Point Grey Mini, P.W. Mini, the Arts Program at Byng, some kids will go to U Hill because it's a smaller school ...but

generally speaking most of the kids will go to Byng". Apparently, parents ask the teachers "should they go to private schools?...last year we had at least five kids go to private schools" and "there's a lot of sharing among each other about where people have gone. There's kids doing gymnastics or music so we kind of get to know about Magee, the Arts Program at Magee". Teachers at Westview talk to the parents about alternative programs throughout the year and former students who have gone to alternative programs are made available by the teachers to advise parents seeking information about these programs. Generally, though, these are described as being very proactive and well-educated parents who are comfortable seeking information for themselves through a variety of networks and using it to their child's best educational advantage.

### *Eastling Elementary School*

I met with three teachers, Sharon, Maureen, and Tina, at this sprawling east-side school after school one day. We had an hour-long discussion about the parent community at the school and how each teacher made information about high school programs available to students and parents. Having all three teachers present at the same interview resulted in an interesting discussion about educational philosophy.

Teachers described Eastling as a school where parents are "quite knowledgeable" and comparatively well-educated. There was some discussion among the three teachers about how involved parents are in their children's schooling. Although there was a very high turn-out for parent-teacher conferences, there is a very small Parent Advisory Council group. While Sharon and Tina were impressed with the parental involvement in their children's education, Maureen observed that "parents are respectful of teachers [but] some of them really don't know what's going on here...I don't see them as being that involved".

When I asked about school choices made by parents, Maureen felt that "they generally tend to like Killarney" because "they don't want their kids to take the bus or go further than they

have to if they can't drive them...the distance plays a part of that". Tina also felt that Killarney "has a good reputation as a school...they feel that there's lots of interesting subjects, so they're attracted to the school".

I then asked about how parents learn about alternative programs and an interesting discussion ensued. Each of the three teachers deals with the issue of informing students and parents about their educational options differently and this had an impact of the results of my survey. Tina began, by explaining that

the kids are always the first to bring it up...I kind of tell them that this is the option. I'll let you know what the options are. It's not the best choice for everyone, but it might be right for you. You have to think about it and discuss it with your parents. I say if you're really interested in academics, you don't have to be in a special program to do really well and get into university. I try and just make it so that they know it's there. I'm not trying to bad-mouth it either...I've never actually suggested to a child or a parent myself that they should involve their child or apply for a school. I only ever do that if the parents are leading into that, if they start asking about it or they ask about high school, what the options are. I've never gone up to a child and told them I think you should...That's just me.

Maureen had a different approach. Of the three teachers, she gave students the most specific directions about what they had to do to learn about the mini school and make the application. She volunteered that

I like to give them as much information as possible. The advantages and the disadvantages of being in a program like that and also what they're going to have to do -- taking the math test and the interview. I think it's really important. There are some students that want to do it just because they think it's the "in" thing to do. They're not really interested in being in a mini school, they just maybe want to be with friends or they

consider it to be a status symbol to be in the school, so I try to give them as much information as possible, but I also tell them that they have to do the research themselves. If they're really, really interested in doing this, they have to talk to their parents, they have to start phoning the high schools and getting information. So, I kind of leave it in their hands, but I also do tend to hand out to certain students that I think would benefit from the program, because I feel some students may not be confident in their abilities, even if they are very high-achieving students. They might not feel they're appropriate for the program, so I will take them aside and talk to them and say this is an opportunity for you, but you need to do the research.

Sharon was the most ambivalent about the mini school program. Her response was that

I have to admit that I'm not sure that I agree with the mini school. Because they are there, because they are a choice right now, when we had our parent conferences in November, I was talking to parents. I brought it up at the conferences because the time line is really quick. There's no time to really think about it or find out, so parents don't know. So I don't do what you do [Maureen] because I don't think there are enough varied programs that really do augment for all the kids. I don't promote it necessarily for all the students because I know that they're not going to qualify for all the programs that are being offered. Today even [at the articulation meeting] they said just because you've got all 'A's, there's only twenty-eight kids out of how many hundreds that apply.

When the survey results came back, eight of the sixteen families applying to the mini school had children in Maureen's class, six were in Tina's class, and two were from Sharon's class. The teachers who were more proactive about advertising the options had more families apply, and it is possible that the teacher's behaviour may account for the difference.



### *Parent Information Meetings at the Mini Schools*

After meeting with the Grade 7 teachers, I began to attend the information meetings that each of the District Specified Alternative Programs provide so that parents can become more informed about the programs available and the application procedures for each program. Over a period of two weeks, I attended eight mini school and two high school information nights. While attending parent meetings, I gained an appreciation for the similarities and differences among the programs. I also got a sense of which schools are considered to be most desirable on the east and west side of the city and some of the concerns and hope that parents brought to these meetings, along with their children. I describe the schools below in the order of their importance to the parents in this study, followed by a number of schools whose meetings I was not able to attend because they conflicted with other meetings.

The **Byng Arts Mini School**, according to its description on the Vancouver School Board website, "is dedicated to the student whose energy and passion are directed towards the Fine Arts" ("Byng Arts Mini School", p. 1). Specifically, they offer enriched programs in Visual Arts, Band and Wind Ensembles, String Orchestra, T.V. and Film Production, and Drama/Theatre. The focus on a specific curricular area makes the Byng Arts Mini School unique among the mini school programs in Vancouver. All of the other mini schools emphasize academic enrichment and target academically gifted students.

Because this mini school is located in the high school which is also the neighbourhood school for one of the elementary schools in my study, I was particularly interested in learning more about this program. I attended the parent information meeting in the auditorium at Lord Byng Secondary School on Tuesday, January 14, 2003, along with approximately three hundred and fifty parents and students. At this meeting, we were told by the Curriculum Information Coordinator, that this four-year-old program was "born out of a desire to create a community of

people who are interested in the arts, both faculty and students". She also informed us that "It's a community where we really encourage both academic excellence and creativity". Academic excellence, at this mini school, however, is not the only criteria. The Application Information Coordinator told us that "we're not looking for the top academic students, like Point Grey or P.W. Mini. We're looking at students who have a C+ or better. Then we call you in for an audition." Her comments revealed an acknowledged academic hierarchy among the District Specified Alternate Programs, with Point Grey, Eric Hamber, and Prince of Wales Mini Schools consistently at the top. The Byng Arts Mini School does not consider itself to be among the academically elite programs.

Here I first learned about the application procedure that was required for all the Mini Schools. Students had to complete an application form. Some schools asked for letters of recommendation or a short personal essay as part of the application. All of the applications had to be submitted to the schools by Friday, January 31<sup>st</sup>. Some schools even specified the time of day (e.g. by 4:00 p.m.). This year, for the first time the district tried to streamline the application process by having a single entrance exam for all the mini schools. The Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills was to be written, at a variety of high school sites around Vancouver, on January 29<sup>th</sup> and then the results were forwarded to all the schools to which the student had applied. All of the mini schools, however, were continuing to administer their own selection process, typically involving another written test and an interview. I heard several parents complain that the CTCS was simply an additional hurdle to students applying for these programs. After these tests and interviews, each mini school would draw up a list of students who would be offered spaces in their program. A waiting list would also be prepared, in case some students were offered spots in more than one program and had to decline an offer. All students were to know about their placement (or lack thereof) by the end of March so they could apply to their neighbourhood high school if their application were unsuccessful.

Some program application tips for parents and students were given at this meeting. For example, students were advised to apply to more than one area (e.g. Band and Visual Art) in order to enhance their chances of being accepted into the program. If they did not qualify in one area, they might be admitted in another. Since the Byng Arts Mini School can accommodate thirty Art students, thirty Music students, and thirty Drama students, there is an opportunity for interested students to make three applications to the same mini school program. I found it interesting that this information was only provided at the meeting, not in the brochure that the school distributed. Unless parents were at the meeting or had contact with others who knew about this advice, their child might be at a disadvantage when applying to the program.

Once admitted, students in the program are streamed in their academic classes in order "to allow them to get to know each other, meet other students in other disciplines and really work on developing that community". Thus this mini school community operates as a "school within a school"; they are part of the neighbourhood school, yet a community unto themselves. As I discovered in this study, the smaller community seems to be even more significant to parents choosing this option than the Fine Arts focus.

**Killarney Mini School** is the District Specified Alternative Program that is located in the neighbourhood school for Eastling School. My survey shows that this mini school was overwhelmingly the program selected by parents at the east-side school who chose alternate programs.

Alone among the District Specified Alternative Programs, Killarney Mini School advertises that its first criterion for selection is that students reside within the Killarney catchment area. Although it also states in the brochure that the Killarney Mini School is a District program open to all students in Vancouver, there is an unapologetic bias in favour of students in the area. During the meeting, we were informed that this school began as a school initiative, not a district program, and the staff decided, after some debate, to keep the school

catchment requirement as part of the entrance criteria. Three-quarters of the spaces in the school are reserved for students in the catchment. It occurred to me that a west-side school would never have been allowed to publish such an exclusive policy without being branded elitist. While protecting these spaces may help east-side students gain more equitable access to the school, I wondered about the relative reputation of Killarney's mini school, since nobody seemed to be afraid that it might be considered elitist to exclude other students in the district.

I attended the parent information meeting at Killarney Secondary School's auditorium on Wednesday, January 22, 2003. It was a two-part affair. At 6:00, those parents who were interested in the mini school met in the auditorium for a one-hour information session. Approximately two hundred and fifty parents and students attended this meeting. They were joined at 7:00 by another three hundred and fifty parents and students for the information meeting about the regular grade eight program. Several parents arriving at 7:00 were surprised to learn that there was an earlier meeting. I wondered how these meetings were advertised.

Before the meeting began, I overheard a mother in front of me trying to convince her daughter that "you want to go to a high end school that will get you into university". She was very impressed with Point Grey's presentation the night before and informed a friend that "Point Grey makes this look like kindergarten. They have so much stuff". She also informed her friend that she and her daughter had been to six mini school meetings and I had the impression that her daughter was applying to all of them.

The principal began the mini school meeting by asking, "Kids in the audience, how many of you live in Killarney's catchment?" Virtually all of the hands went up, including the girl in front of me. She then told them that only twenty-eight of the estimated two hundred to two hundred and fifty applicants would be selected for the mini school and urged them all to "think of yourselves as students in Killarney Grade 8, not mini students". I recalled the teachers at Eastling School sharing that, during the high school articulation process, representatives from

Killarney “were talking about how concerned they are about the students who apply for the mini school and don’t get accepted...so they’re now developing extra-curricular programs so that those kids who didn’t get accepted into mini school get play time with their buddies who got into the mini school.” They also commented that “it sounds like they’re wanting to try to sell the regular program...with less emphasis on the mini school. That’s the message that they were trying to get across to us”. This was clearly the message being delivered to those parents and students who attended the information meeting, as well. Later in the presentation, when discussing the testing and interview process, a Killarney teacher commented that “Our hearts go out to all candidates” and “we always end up happy with the students chosen, but we’re never comfortable with ‘the kids that don’t make it’ ”. She requested that parents help alleviate their child’s anxiety about getting in or not. When one parent asked “What makes this mini school so special?” the rather defensive answer was “It’s not a competition; it’s a choice. Each mini school is different. You have a choice.” It would appear that at least some of the staff, and perhaps the administration, are sensitive about the possible elitism of having a selective alternative program in the school.

Parents at this meeting were told that teacher and principal recommendations for students entering the program should not be written “because teachers don’t like to single out students”. Teachers were expected to discuss individual students during the articulation meetings, but not submit a written recommendation. I wondered how this worked for students from schools outside of Killarney’s catchment area, whose teachers do not attend an articulation meeting.

Criteria for student selection, apart from being from one of six elementary schools in the catchment area, include students who are verbal, involved in the school and community and not shy or a rote learner. There is an effort to ensure gender equality. Students who are not fluent in English are not encouraged to apply. In this east-side neighbourhood, with its high population of immigrants, that English requirement alone would exclude a number of students.

I stayed for the regular high school meeting, as well, but did not take part in the school "walkabout". On my way out to the parking lot a mother, who may have recognized me from a previous meeting, struck up an impassioned conversation. She began by fuming that she was frustrated with Vancouver's cross-boundary policy, which makes it almost impossible to choose which high school she wants her daughter to attend. She and her daughter live in an east-side high school's catchment and she does not want her daughter going there. Her first choice would be to send her to a neighbouring west-side high school, but she is applying to a variety of mini schools to avoid having to send her to her own school -- a school that she believes to be undesirable, academically and in terms of safety.

**Point Grey Mini School** was consistently cited at other mini school information nights as being the most academically elite and exclusive of the District Specified Alternative Programs. Only one student in my study applied to this program, as well as the Prince of Wales Mini School. Before attending the mini school meetings, I contacted each school and asked if they would send me an information package. I expected, since most of these programs are designed for the benefit of students residing in Vancouver, that my living in Burnaby might have been a problem when I asked them to send information. However, Point Grey Mini School was the only program that refused to send their information outside of the district. From my first contact with the school, I was aware that this was the most exclusive of the schools I visited.

This attractive west-side high school elicited a number of admiring comments from parents before the meeting. Comments like "This is bigger than Magee's auditorium" and "P.W.'s auditorium is bigger" also indicated that many of these families had also been to a number of information nights in the past two weeks and I felt a sense of competition among parents choosing the "best" schools.

I attended the parent information night for both the mini school and the regular high school program in the auditorium at Point Grey Secondary School on Tuesday, January 21, 2003,

along with close to one thousand parents and students. This was by far the largest meeting that I attended. We were told that they expected to receive between three hundred fifty and four hundred applications for thirty spots in Grade 8.

This is also one of the oldest mini schools, having been in existence as a district enrichment program since 1979. We were told that it is "not an accelerated program like Hamber Mini", but a more enriched curriculum. Students were told that "if you are not at least a 'B' student, this is not the school for you".

Although the district mandates that all students applying for a District Specified Alternative Program must write the Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills, Point Grey's mini school does not use the district exam as part of their assessment; they administer their own writing exercise and math problem-solving exercise. From the four hundred and fifty applicants who complete these exercises, one hundred will be selected for an interview involving the student, the parents and two teachers. Following these interviews thirty students, fifteen boys and fifteen girls, are chosen. Ten will be from Point Grey's catchment; the other twenty will be from "all over the city". Diversity is advertised as being a strong point of this program, but I had to wonder about that claim when the following information was given.

Parents in this program are not only expected to be active in fund-raising and on field trips, but to provide, if they are able, workshops and programs for the students. This seemed to me to be likely to exclude more working-class parents, without the time or the specialized skills to contribute to the program. While other mini schools may have similar policies in practice, this meeting set the most exclusive tone of any of the mini school meetings I attended.

When parents asked about the cost of the program, they were told that "trips cost about \$800 per year... It does not cost a lot of money". Perhaps \$800 is not a lot of money for parents in Point Grey's catchment, but it would be prohibitive to many families on the east side of Vancouver. I wondered how many families at Point Grey's mini school ask for subsidies for field

trips. I left the meeting behind a father who appeared to be trying to talk his son out of applying to the mini school, reminding him that the odds of his being one of thirty students selected out of four hundred applicants were not very good. I wondered if the exclusive tone at the meeting was deliberately adopted in order to dissuade students from applying for an oversubscribed program.

**John Oliver Mini School** is an accelerated program in a small group setting, leading to Advanced Placement courses in the senior grades. I attended the parent information night in the library at John Oliver Secondary School, on Wednesday, January 15, 2003, along with approximately seventy-five parents and students. This program did not seem as popular as the Byng Arts Mini School, whose meeting I had attended the night before. Prior to the meeting, I overheard parents sharing that they were interested in John Oliver's mini school because "they have lots of field trips", "they have just one teacher, like in elementary", "kids will be more focused", "they are looking for kids who think out of the box", "J.O. Mini allows them to learn in their own way" and "other programs are more elitist". During the presentation to the parents, the strengths of the program were presented as the acceleration of academics, leading to Advanced Placement courses in Grades 11 and 12, students' participation in academic competitions and outdoor activities, leadership opportunities, and the computer program. Although the students have a separate building, where they are together for some of their core curriculum subjects, they are integrated with the regular school for other classes and for electives. Mini school students are encouraged to take leadership roles in the school community.

Some program application tips were given to the families attending the meeting. Unlike the policy shared at Killarney's meeting, parents here were told that if they could get a written teacher recommendation from the elementary school, this would give a student "a definite advantage at John Oliver Mini School". The other selection procedure used, in addition to the district-mandated test, was a writing test and a ten-minute interview. Parents were warned not to wait until the deadline to apply.



When students in the program spoke about how they felt, some interesting comments were that "This program is good for kids who are social and academically motivated" and "You'll be classified as the smart people. People look up to you". In response to a question about how they felt about applying to John Oliver Mini School last year, one student said "I only applied to John Oliver Mini and was accused of being 'cocky' ". Another remarked that she applied to several mini schools and chose John Oliver. A third student had a sister who recommended the program. Some parents asked questions indicating that costs were a concern. My impression, from the questions asked was that most of the parents were less affluent than parents at the Byng Arts Mini School meeting. I wondered whether John Oliver's Mini School would attract many parents from further west in Vancouver, or if most of the applicants were from the east side and many from the school catchment area.

**David Thompson's Odyssey Program** claims to be unique among the District Specified Alternate Programs because students in the program do not stay together as a group all the time. It is not a program that provides a close-knit student community. Nor does it provide extended field trips "because we're not funded for it"; typical of east-side schools, there is a sensitivity about asking parents to fund school activities and, therefore fewer expensive field trips. The focus of the Odyssey Program is exclusively academic.

I attended the parent information night in the auditorium at David Thompson Secondary School on Thursday, January 16, 2003, along with approximately one hundred and twenty-five parents and students. We were greeted by the Head of the Odyssey Program, who informed us that she also had two high-school aged children and understood that "we're all trying to get our children into the best programs available". She then described how the program provides enrichment courses in English, Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, and French. Not all students in the program take enriched courses in all subjects. Some only take enrichment courses in English, French, and Social Studies, while others take the enriched Math/Science courses.

Two thirds of the thirty students in this year's Grade 8 group do enriched courses in both Humanities and Sciences. Students are integrated with the rest of the school for electives.

Students and parents were advised that "if you're an E.S.L. student and are receiving support for English, do not apply for this or any other Alternative Program." They were then reassured that "if you're good in math [but not English] you will be placed in an appropriate math level". Since the vast majority of parents and students at the meeting were Asian and most of the discussion around me was not in English, I guessed that there might be an issue in the school about students with weak skills in English and strong math skills feeling excluded from enrichment opportunities like the mini school program.

**The Britannia Venture Program** describes itself on the program brochure as a "World Mini School". It is located in an East Vancouver high school that considers itself to be a Community School educational experience in a multicultural setting. Although this mini school, like the other District Specified Alternative Programs, is an academically challenging program and prepares many of its students for the International Baccalaureate program at the school, the focus seems to be much more global than any of the other mini schools I learned about in this study. The themes of "community" and "cultural diversity" were reiterated throughout the parent information evening on Monday, January 20, 2003.

I attended this meeting with approximately one hundred parents and students in the Staff Lounge at Britannia Secondary School. The International Baccalaureate Coordinator explained that the Venture Program is an enrichment stream which was started five years ago to enhance the International Baccalaureate Program at the school. They were finding it difficult to attract students into the I.B. program in Grade 11 if they had not attended the school since grade 8. I wondered if this could be due to the inner-city location of the school. Parents were told that, while not all Venture students, after completing the program in Grade 10, go into the I.B.

program, "they will generally attend some post-secondary program. All we do is offer the opportunity".

In addition to the academic focus, however, students learn "an empathetic acceptance of cultural and social diversity". The program's description on the Vancouver School Board website lists "Universal Values", "Global Understanding", "Personal Excellence" and "Community Service" as the "four key tenets" of the program ("Britannia Venture Program" p. 1). While post-secondary preparation is clearly a focus, the coordinator assured the parents and students that "we're not looking for little Einsteins". If a student struggles in an academic area, parents were assured that "we try to be proactive... We are interested in inclusion, not exclusion and will work to keep students in the program".

Their selection process seemed to me to be a lot more student friendly than any of the other mini schools whose meetings I attended. In addition to the district-administered test, the Venture program has prospective students come in for a day in which they provide a writing sample, have a pizza lunch, participate in a World Music Experience, and complete a cooperative problem-solving activity. As a teacher, I felt that by the end of such a diverse day I would know the students better than I would after a high-stakes fifteen-minute interview. There would also be more opportunities for less self-confident students to relax and demonstrate their strengths in the cooperative learning activities. This struck me as the least intimidating of the mini school application processes and I wondered if it attracted a more diverse group of students as a result.

Judging by questions asked by the parents about fund-raising and extra costs, the majority of the parents investigating this program were less affluent than parents at other meetings I attended. They were concerned about provincial cuts to funding and were told that "costs are going up. Templeton and P.W. charge up to \$800 per year [for field trips]. We need to start charging full costs, but the board has said that no students will be denied an opportunity because of financial circumstances". I left the meeting feeling that this was the program that showed the

most sensitivity to social issues surrounding equity of access to enriched programs. I wondered, however, how many students from the more-affluent west side of the city would be attracted to the Venture Programme, due to its east side location and lack of expensive outdoor experiences, relative to some of the other District Specified Alternative Programs.

**Ideal Mini School** is the smallest of the District Specified Alternative Programs, with approximately one hundred eighteen students from Grade 8 to Grade 12, and just six teachers. Although the school is affiliated with Churchill High School, it exists in its own building and is very much a separate community. Unlike the other mini schools, Ideal did not have a formal parent information night. Instead they had an Open House, from 4:00 - 6:00 at the school site, with students acting as guides and ambassadors for the school.

I attended the Open House from 4:30 – 5:00 on Tuesday, January 21, 2003, and estimated that, during that half hour, approximately seventy-five parents were touring the school. I was told by one of the teachers that there are forty-four Grade 8 students, twenty-eight Grade 9 students, twenty Grade 10 students, sixteen Grade 11 students, and just ten Grade 12 students. There is a high drop-out rate from the program in the upper grades, possibly because of a relative lack of programs that can be offered with such low numbers. Some of the Grade 11 and 12 students go into the International Baccalaureate program at Churchill School. Perhaps older students also want to interact with a larger number of students their own age.

I overheard parents who were interested in the program say that “this school is really into social action and political awareness” and “unlike other minis, Ideal really works to nurture students”. The two students I know personally who have attended the program were both bright students who did not feel comfortable, socially, in a large high school setting. One later transferred to a Catholic high school; the other, who came from the Waldorf School in North Vancouver, still attends Ideal and says he intends to stay until Grade 12. I left with the impression that this program would have a limited appeal, but would be a good choice for

students who did not fit into a regular high school social structure and who would benefit from the close social ties of a small, intimate learning community.

**Tupper Mini School** is not featured on the Vancouver School District web site, perhaps because it is a relatively new program. It could be this lack of advertising that was responsible for the fact that only about fifty parents and students attended the information meeting and several students appeared to be there alone, without a parent.

Before the meeting started a mother next to me, with her thirteen-year-old son, volunteered that he was also getting ready for an interview at St. Georges. She had intended to send him to the interview in a clean T-shirt and jeans, but was informed by a friend that the should go in a shirt and tie, dress pants, and dress shoes (which he had to buy) "to show that he's willing to conform". She also explained that she had attended several mini school meetings because they live "on the wrong side of the divide of the east side and west side of Vancouver" and many of her friends were advising her to get her son into a better school. They lived in a west-side school's catchment, but she wanted something "more upscale". She also commented that she would not let her son go to another local high school because it was not considered (among her friends, at least) to be "a safe school". Clearly she was shopping for the best educational program and one of her criteria was to find a school that was acceptable among her social group.

At the meeting on Thursday, January 23, 2003 we were told that students can accelerate in Science, completing three years in two, and Math, completing five years in four. English and Social Studies are combined as Humanities for Grades 8 to 10. They are integrated into the school for all other subjects. Questions from the few parents who were there included issues of safety, community, arts and technology electives available at the school, and costs. Parents were urged to apply whether or not they thought finances might be an issue. Again, east-side schools seem to be more sensitive to monetary issues than their west-side counterparts. I left the meeting

wondering how many applicants Tupper's mini school would attract from outside its own catchment.

There are a number of other District Specified Alternative Programs whose parent information nights I was unable to attend because they conflicted with the meetings I did attend. **Gladstone Mini School** is a two-year program that provides accelerated and enriched learning opportunities, leading to Advanced Placement courses. **The Hamber Challenge Program** is another accelerated program that enables students to complete grades 8, 9, and 10 in just two years. This school was frequently cited as one of the more academically challenging programs. **Prince of Wales Mini School** combines an enriched academic program with an extensive outdoor education component. It is one of the more exclusive mini schools because of the high fees it charges for its outdoor education program. **Templeton Mini School** combines enriched academics and outdoor education with a high degree of school leadership. **Vancouver Technical Summit Program** is a three-year program emphasizing academic enrichment and acceleration, as well as school and community service.

These are the District Specified Alternative Programs offered by the Vancouver School District for enrichment. I was glad that I took the time to attend so many parent information meetings. At the end of the two-week round of meetings, I felt I had a good feel for which schools parents considered to be most academically and socially elite (Point Grey Mini School and Prince of Wales Mini School) and how sensitive each of the schools whose meetings I attended seemed to be to issues that might affect equitable access to their programs. It gave me a little insight, as well into questions that concerned parents who were considering these programs for their children, before I actually collected and analyzed these issues as they were articulated in my survey.

### *Summary of Interviews and Observations*

Speaking with the Grade 7 teachers helped me to understand the context in which the parents at each of these schools would be making their decisions. At Westview, the teachers expected that as many as 50% of the students might apply to a variety of alternative programs, reflecting the high expectations and proactive nature of the parents in this community. Teachers at Eastling were more cautious and indicated that the high school itself was somewhat ambivalent about selling alternatives to the regular program. While they expected a number of students to apply, they anticipated that the majority of the students would end up enrolling in Killarney's regular Grade 8 program.

Attending the mini school meetings gave me an overview of the programs offered at the schools which were chosen by the parents in my study. The Byng Arts Mini School emphasized that its focus is not as academic as other mini schools, and singled out Point Grey and Prince of Wales as two of the most academically selective. Its enriched arts curriculum is designed to attract artistically-gifted students who would benefit from being part of a small learning community which shares a common interest. The Coordinator told the parents at the meeting that "one of the things we're working really hard at is preserving electives in a time of cutbacks. These kinds of courses are somewhat threatened" She was clearly positioning the school as a means of resisting the cuts being made to neighbourhood schools' regular programs. What was not as clearly stated is that the mini school is also resisting rising class sizes by capping their enrollment at thirty students in each of the Drama, Music, and Art streams. Small class sizes proved to be even more significant to parents choosing this option than the Fine Arts curriculum.

Killarney Mini School also emphasized its small cohort of just twenty-eight students as an educational advantage of its program. Its other focus is on enrichment through field trips to

Newcastle Island, Strathcona Park, Manning Park, Banfield and Barkerville, as well as creative group work. Although they actively seek students with "high intellectual potential and demonstrated initiative", there was an undercurrent of unease at Killarney about excluding students who do not meet the mini school's entrance requirements. This concern about the feelings of students who failed to qualify for the program was communicated to the Grade 7 teachers at their articulation meeting, as well as the mini school meeting itself and may have had an effect on how proactive the Grade 7 teachers were about advising students about how to apply for the program. Such sensitivity to students' feelings was consistently more openly stated on the east than the west side of the city. The most exclusive schools were all west-side mini schools.

Point Grey was acknowledged several times, at mini school meetings, as one of the most academically elite and it emphasized its selectivity at its parent meeting. Perhaps because they know they will receive up to fifteen times as many applications as they have spaces available, Point Grey does not understate their expectations. They tell parents "if your child is timid, doesn't like to be away from home...do not apply." Like all the mini schools, they also clearly state that "this is not appropriate for ESL students; they must function at a "B" level in a regular class without assistance". What is not stated is that, for schools like Point Grey, with a burgeoning ESL population, the mini school is a program where students will not be interacting as frequently with these recent immigrants. While Point Grey stresses that "cultural diversity" is one of its criteria, this diversity evidently does not extend to students who are learning English as a second (or third) language. The mini schools might, therefore, be facilitating "white flight" within culturally diverse communities.

My attendance at the eight mini school meetings and the two high school meetings – Point Grey and Killarney – helped me understand the variety of programs that are available as well as the procedure that students have to go through to apply to one of these alternative programs. The district-administered Canadian Test of Cognitive Skills was an attempt to



streamline the application process for students applying to more than one mini school, a situation that applied to only one student in my study. However all the mini schools were continuing their own admissions procedures, including tests and interviews, as well. Several parents at the mini school meetings were unaware of the district-wide testing procedure, not having been informed by their elementary school of the times and locations of the test. I wondered if some students' applications were affected by their lack of knowledge about the new procedure and what compensation, if any, would be made if they missed the exam date. As a teacher, almost all of the admissions procedures seemed to me to favour students who are out-going and articulate. More reserved or self-conscious students might be at a disadvantage in a fifteen-minute interview, where they knew their admission to the program was at stake. The only admission procedure that impressed me as being truly open to students with a variety of learning styles was the one described by Britannia's Horizons program. I felt that, at the end of a day that included a music class, a group problem-solving activity and a pizza lunch, even if the child were not admitted to the program, they might have benefited from the activities with the other applicants. I also felt that, after having a full day and such a variety of activities in which to interact with students, I might be more able to assess an introverted student's potential to benefit from the enriched learning activities provided by the program.

I was privileged to hear the hopes and concerns of a variety of parents as they considered these programs for their children. Some were seeking challenges for their children, some were looking for a safe environment, others seemed to be shopping for the most prestigious school program. With this background knowledge, I was ready to collect the data that I hoped would indicate to me whether or not all parents were equitably positioned when it was time to decide to apply to one of these alternative programs or to enroll in the neighbourhood high school.

## Chapter V – Research Findings from the Grade 7 Parents Survey

After speaking with Grade 7 teachers at the two elementary schools and attending mini school and neighbourhood high school information nights, I delivered surveys to the two elementary schools in mid-February and these were distributed by the schools to the parents of Grade 7 students. I collected them the week before Spring Break, in mid-March, and began my analysis of the quantitative component of my study.

### *Family Demographics that Have an Impact on School Choice*

The survey was administered to address two questions: Are there differences between parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver who choose to apply to alternative programs and parents who send their child to the neighbourhood high school? If so, could these differences be attributable to differences in cultural or social capital? With regard to the first question, I was particularly interested in examining any differences in family residence (east or west side of Vancouver), parental education, and parental occupation.

### *Family Residence and School Choice*

Family residence distinguished the two school communities, as Westview is situated in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood in Point Grey, while Eastling is in a middle-to-working class neighbourhood in Champlain Heights. To analyze these data I calculated the percentage of parents choosing the neighbourhood school and the percentage of parents choosing various alternative programs at each school, then compared the results.

Table 1

Comparison of Choices of High School Programs made by Parents at Westview and at Eastling

Elementary School	Westview	Eastling
	%	%
<b>High School Applications Made</b>		
Mini School within the Neighbourhood High School	30	42
Other Mini Schools	3	0
Other Public School Alternative Programs	3	0
Multiple Options Including Private Schools	7	0
Out-of-Catchment High School	0	2
Neighbourhood High School	57	56
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

*Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Westview School*

From Westview, nine of the thirty families responding to the survey (30%) indicated that their child had applied only to the Byng Arts Mini School. One family (3%) reported making an application to Point Grey and Prince of Wales Mini Schools, two of the most academically elite of the mini schools. One family (3%) was applying to the Prince of Wales Bridge Program and the Lord Byng Horizons Program, two alternative programs within the Vancouver public school system that provide special classes for students who require extra academic and social support. Two families (7%) included private school options in their applications. One of these families was applying not only to Lord Byng, but to University Hill (crossing a catchment boundary), and the Fraser Academy and Glen Eden (two private schools that cater to students needing extra academic support). The other family was applying to the Byng Arts Mini School, but was also considering Little Flower Academy (a private Catholic school), and Kitsilano Secondary School (crossing a catchment boundary). Two families (7%) planned to enroll their child in University

Hill Secondary School and two (7%) were planning to attend Kitsilano Secondary School.

Initially I thought that these families were crossing boundaries to attend high schools out of their residential catchment. I was later informed that the families moving to Kitsilano and University Hill Secondary Schools had already crossed catchment boundaries to allow their children to attend Westview, rather than their designated elementary school. They were returning to their neighbourhood schools as their child made the transition to high school. Thirteen families (43%) were enrolling in Lord Byng, the neighbourhood high school for Westview.

One mother whose child is going to Kitsilano Secondary School indicated that she had been "advised to attend the closest school" for high school and that she wished "there was a greater possibility to get a child into a school outside their catchment area". Interestingly, her child did not apply to the Byng Arts Mini School as a means of crossing boundaries, a strategy that was reported by several parents attending the mini school meetings and by one of the parents in this study who applied to the Byng Arts Mini School. This may have been because she felt that her child would not qualify, academically or artistically, for the Arts Mini School or that the program did not interest her child.

The other family going to Kitsilano indicated that, although they had moved out of Lord Byng's catchment boundary and did not feel they had the option of keeping their child with friends from Westview, they felt comfortable with their choice of schools, based on experience and advice from older siblings. They did not choose to make a cross-boundary application because they were happy with the program at Kitsilano, their neighbourhood school.

In some ways, the two families going to University Hill Secondary could have been included with families making alternative choices. They commented on their surveys that "my child wanted to go to U Hill" and that "class size" was the most important consideration in their choice of schools. I recalled Anne's saying that "some kids go to U Hill because it's a smaller school". Although University Hill was their neighbourhood school, these parents had already

made one school choice, when their child attended Westview instead of University Hill Elementary, and knew how to make cross-boundary applications successfully. They were now choosing to return to their catchment, rather than “grandfathering” their child into Lord Byng to stay with friends. They appeared to be making a choice based on smaller class sizes and their child’s preference for a different school. However, I included them with those parents who chose to attend their neighbourhood school because they were part of a pattern on the west side of the city that was not true on the east side. Well-educated parents from Westview chose the regular program at their neighbourhood school because the high school is considered to have desirable programs.

Although there was a wide range of choices being made, nine of the families choosing programs other than Lord Byng were combining the option of attending the nearby neighbourhood school and taking advantage of the more enriched educational opportunity provided in the “school within a school” model of the Byng Arts Mini School. Presumably, if their children were not successful in gaining entrance to the mini school, they would attend the regular program in the same high school. Only three families (10%) were hedging their bets and applying to a variety of high school programs, both public and private. Although sixteen of the respondents to the survey (44%) indicated that they were making alternative choices to their neighbourhood school’s regular program, thirteen of the families responding (43%) indicated they were planning to attend Lord Byng, and four families, (13%) although moving to Kitsilano and University Hill Secondary Schools, were also attending their neighbourhood school. The majority of parents at Westview were opting for the regular program in the neighbourhood high school.

### *Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Eastling School*

At Eastling, fifteen of the parents responding to the survey (42%) reported that their child had applied to the Killarney Mini School program. Only one parent (2%) indicated that she was considering crossing boundaries, and school districts, to move her child out to London Secondary School in Richmond, B.C. This parent indicated that her motivation for moving to another district was related to grave concerns she had about bullying. She wrote on her survey:

Determining what high school my child goes to is very, very important for my husband and I. It is also important to have a good relationships with everybody involved and councilors are usually either very hard to meet or don't understand the needs of the child. We need to remember that a lot happens behind the backs of teachers, principals, parents and councilors and that is a parent's worst fear.

Other than this exception, judging by the responses to the survey, making choices outside of the neighbourhood school at Killarney was not an option that was chosen by parents at Eastling. This was predicted by the teachers during their interview. They commented that parents "generally tend to like Killarney", because "it has a good reputation as a school itself" and due to its proximity to their neighbourhood. Twenty of the families from Eastling (56%) indicated that their child will be attending Killarney, the neighbourhood school.

In the rest of this analysis, I will be including all parents who chose the regular programs at Lord Byng and Killarney, as well as the four families returning to University Hill and Kitsilano Secondary Schools, as families choosing to attend their neighbourhood high school. All other families will be classified as those who made alternative choices for high school.

### *Comparison of School Choices by Family Residence*

Families residing on the west side of Vancouver represent, by and large, a higher socioeconomic group than those residing on the east side of the city. The fact that parents at Westview were making more diverse choices than parents at Eastling supports the findings of other studies that parents from higher socioeconomic strata make more educational choices than their working class counterparts. Some families from Westview were able to make choices involving expensive private schools; none of the parents at Eastling indicated that this was an option for them. As noted by many critics of the "status quo" ( Chubb and Moe, 1997; Hassel, 1998; Hoxby, 1998), private school options have always been available inequitably to more affluent families. This sample suggests, however, that the Education Minister's fears regarding students making a mass exodus from public to private schools are unfounded, at least in these Vancouver schools, during the transition from elementary to secondary school. Making some optional programs more widely available to working-class families is one of the chief arguments in favour of school choice, but in Vancouver, it is unlikely to affect the trickle of students into private schools.

Most parents at both schools were applying to either the regular program or the mini school at the neighbourhood high school. Twenty-six of the thirty families at Westview (87%) were applying either to their neighbourhood high school -- Lord Byng, University Hill, Kitsilano -- or the Byng Arts Mini School. Thirty-five of the thirty-six families at Eastling (92%) were planning to apply to Killarney or the Killarney Mini School . Within the neighbourhood high school, mini schools were attractive; ten of the thirty families at Westview (33%) and fifteen of the thirty-six families at Eastling (42%) were making this choice. I expected that a higher percentage of parents whose children attend Westview would choose to send their child to a District Specified or other alternative program, when compared to parents whose children attend

Eastling. The higher percentage of parents from Eastling who applied to the mini school within their neighbourhood school suggests that Vancouver's model of providing District Specified Alternative Programs in neighbourhood schools on the east side of the city, as well as the west side, and restricting access at Killarney to privilege students living in the school's catchment may be successful strategies to encourage a variety of parents to apply to the mini school programs and provide them with more equitable school choice.

The elite programs – Prince of Wales and Point Grey Mini Schools – had virtually no impact, which is interesting, given that they were identified at several of the mini school meetings as being the most desirable. Perhaps the exclusive tone set at Point Grey's meeting caused students and their parents to make other choices.

### *Parents' Education and School Choice*

Several studies have commented on an apparent correlation between school choice and the level of education completed by the parents making the choices (Ambler, 1994; Ball et al., 1995). Much empirical evidence exists to support the theory that parents who have completed postsecondary, and especially university, education tend to take advantage of educational choices in the public school system more frequently than parents who have completed a high school education or less. Many researchers have postulated that school choices are most often made by those who have more experience in, and knowledge about, the education system and are, therefore, more aware of the educational benefits that such a program might provide for their child.

Furthermore, the educational level of mothers seems to be a stronger indicator of who will take advantage of school choices, than the educational level of fathers, particularly in working-class schools. This study supports the observation made by Ambler (1994) that



the most common ingredient in the families of assisted-place [economically disadvantaged] students...is the presence of a relatively well educated mother (often a single parent), who gives her child strong encouragement to succeed academically and who actively seeks out educational opportunities. (p. 367)

When survey results were analyzed, I was encouraged by the range of educational and occupational levels represented by this group of parents. Although it was a small sample, I felt that I could make some observations about parental choice, based on the information they provided. I began by comparing the educational level of parents choosing alternative programs and those choosing the neighbourhood high school. As the educational level of the mother has proved elsewhere to be of particular significance, I also separated this variable.

Table 2

Levels of Education of Parents Choosing Alternative Programs or Regular Programs in Neighbourhood Schools

High School Choice	Fathers		Mothers		Total	
	A	N	A	N	A	N
Level of Education	%	%	%	%	%	%
Elementary School	0	6	0	11	0	8
High School Diploma	19	23	24	24	21	23
Apprenticeship/trade school	15	11	3	3	9	7
College diploma/certificate	7	11	21	35	14	24
Bachelor's Degree	22	17	31	11	27	14
Graduate/Professional Degree	37	31	21	16	29	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

A = Alternative Program      N = Neighbourhood High School (Regular Program)

The level of education in the sample as a whole was relatively high. Overall, 45% of all the parents in the study had completed university and 26% had completed graduate or professional degrees. The data show that a greater percentage of fathers and mothers who select

alternative programs have completed at least one university degree. Fifty-nine percent of the fathers and 51% of the mothers selecting alternative programs have completed university, compared to just 48% of the fathers and 27% of the mothers choosing to send their children to the neighbourhood high school.

Although the level of education for the parents in the sample as a whole is very high, however, there is a marked difference when the two schools are compared.

Table 3

Comparison of the Levels of Education of Parents at Westview and Eastling

Elementary School:	Fathers		Mothers	
	Westview	Eastling	Westview	Eastling
Level of Education	%	%	%	%
Elementary School	0	6	0	11
High School Diploma	0	40	10	36
Apprenticeship/trade school	14	12	3	3
College diploma/certificate	14	6	37	22
Bachelor's Degree	17	21	20	20
Graduate/Professional Degree	55	15	30	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

While all of the parents at Westview had completed high school, 6% of the fathers and 11% of the mothers at Eastling reported elementary school as their highest level of education completed. Most of these parents also reported completing their education outside of Canada in a language other than English. At the other end of the educational scale, while 55% of the fathers and 30% of the mothers at Westview had completed graduate or professional degrees, only 15% of the fathers and 8% of the mothers at Eastling had completed this level of education.

I wondered how the relatively high level of education of parents at Westview affected their choice of high school programs when compared with the relatively lower and more diverse

level of education reported by parents at Eastling. So I analyzed the data further by comparing fathers and mothers at each of the elementary schools by the high school programs they chose.

**Table 4**

**Comparison of the Levels of Education of Parents Choosing High School Programs**

Fathers' Education				
Elementary School: High School Choice:	Westview		Eastling	
	Alternative	Neighbourhood	Alternative	Neighbourhood
Level of Education	%	%	%	%
Elementary School	0	0	0	11
High School Diploma	0	0	36	42
Apprenticeship/trade school	23	6	7	16
College diploma/certificate	8	19	7	5
Bachelor's Degree	15	19	29	16
Graduate/Professional Degree	54	56	21	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Mothers' Education				
Elementary School: High School Choice:	Westview		Eastling	
	Alternative	Neighbourhood	Alternative	Neighbourhood
Level of Education	%	%	%	%
Elementary School	0	0	0	20
High School Diploma	8	12	38	35
Apprenticeship/trade school	8	0	0	5
College diploma/certificate	38	35	6	35
Bachelor's Degree	23	18	38	5
Graduate/Professional Degree	23	35	19	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

### *Level of Education and Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Westview School*

Perhaps because there is a generally higher level of education at Westview, the level of education achieved by the parents did not have as direct a relationship to their choice of high school options as did the level of parents' education at Eastling. It was interesting to observe that, at Westview, parents with higher levels of education were slightly more likely to choose the neighbourhood school than an alternative program.

None of the fathers whose children attended Westview reported that they had not completed at least some post-secondary education. Of the four fathers who had completed an apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school, three (75%) chose the Byng Arts Mini School. Only one of the four fathers (25%) with a community college diploma or certificate chose an alternative program and this was the P.W. Bridge or Lord Byng Horizons Program, which provides extra social and academic support for students. The other three elected to send their children to Lord Byng. Two of the five fathers (40%) having completed bachelors degrees chose the Byng Arts Mini School. Just seven of the sixteen fathers (44%) with graduate or professional degrees chose alternative programs for their children. However, four of these made multiple choices, including private school options.

None of the mothers completing the survey from Westview indicated that they had not completed high school. Two of the three mothers (66%) who indicated that high school was their highest level of education chose to send their children to Lord Byng. One was choosing Prince of Wales Bridge Program or Lord Byng's Horizons Program, described above. This choice would have been made on the recommendation of the Grade 7 teacher, but I include it as a parental choice, since two programs are indicated and this parent has obviously done some research to identify and apply to the programs most suited to her child. Only one mother indicated that she had completed an apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school and she chose to

have her child apply to Lord Byng's Arts Mini School. Three of the mothers who had completed bachelors degrees (50%) selected the Byng Arts Mini School; three chose the regular program at Lord Byng. Three of the nine mothers with graduate or professional degrees (33%) chose educational options, including Byng Arts Mini School and Point Grey and Prince of Wales Mini Schools. The other six mothers with the most advanced degrees chose Lord Byng, Kitsilano, or University Hill Secondary Schools. Although not as highly educated as the fathers completing the survey, this is a group of mothers in which 50% have attended university. As with the fathers at Westview, these well-educated mother show a lot of support for their neighbourhood schools.

#### *Level of Education and Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Eastling School*

At Eastling, education appears to play a more significant role in predicting which parents will choose the Killarney Mini School and which will send their children to the general program at Killarney Secondary. Several studies have indicated that, among less affluent families, one of the strongest predictors of who will take advantage of school choice is the education level of the child's mother. This study strongly supports that finding. As noted previously, almost all of the parents at Eastling (97%) chose a program within their neighbourhood school. Only one parent responding to the survey chose a school other than Killarney. All of the other parents making an alternative choice chose the mini "school within a school" at Killarney.

Parents at Eastling generally had lower levels of education than those at Westview. Only twenty-seven of the sixty-nine parents (32%) had attended university. Six (9%) had not completed high school. Of these six parents, five (83%) indicated that their schooling was completed outside of Canada (two in El Salvador, two in Korea, and one in Hong Kong). These families would be doubly disadvantaged when making a choice among high school programs, as they have not experienced a high school education and they may not be familiar with the

Canadian education system. They, and perhaps their children, may also not be sufficiently fluent in English to understand information being provided by the teacher or the school district about these programs.

All of the six parents at Eastling who did not complete high school, two fathers and four mothers, chose to send their children to the neighbourhood school. One of these mothers indicated that she would be willing to be interviewed, but when I called her to discuss this, she asked me if I could arrange for her son to get into the mini school even though his marks were not good enough. Given that this conversation took place through an interpreter (another teenage son), I suspect that the son in grade seven also spoke English as a second language and would, therefore, not meet the academic expectations of the mini school. Clearly she was very confused about how the application process worked and she may also have been uncertain of the relative educational value of the mini school program. Although she had perceived that some parents considered this to be a more desirable school choice, she did not have enough information about the program to take advantage of the mini school option, even if her son did qualify, as the application deadline was long past when our conversation took place. The triple handicap of a low level of educational achievement and an unfamiliarity with both the English language and the Vancouver school system made it almost impossible for this parent to make an informed choice among high school programs. She is a classic example of the sort of working class parent whom proponents of school choice do not consider when promoting more choice for parents. As Ambler observes (1994), “ ‘power to parents’ often has meant increased power to relatively affluent and well educated parents who are more likely than poor parents to have the time, the self-confidence, and the knowledge to take advantage of local school autonomy” (p. 369). None of the parents whose formal education did not include high school chose to send their child to the mini school and my encounter with one of these parents suggests that ignorance of the choices being offered was a deterrent to her making a choice other than the neighbourhood high school.

Thirteen fathers whose children attend Eastling (40%) indicated that their highest level of education was a high school diploma. Five of these (38%) chose to make an application to the Killarney Mini School. The other eight (62%) elected to send their children to Killarney. I was surprised that such a relatively high percentage of parents with a high school education applied to the mini school. One of these five fathers was married to a woman with a bachelors degree and they were the family considering sending their child to a high school in Richmond, due to concerns about bullying. The other four fathers, all married to mothers who also had a high school diploma, had children who were in Maureen's class. During the teacher interview, Maureen was the teacher who indicated that she made mini school information widely available to all of her students, rather than selecting a few. The other two teachers seemed either less supportive of the mini school program or were more selective about who received the information sent by the school board. I wondered if these four families with relatively less educational background had benefited from Maureen's approach of making information about District Specified Alternative Programs more widely available to all the children in her class. I also wondered if there were a network among these families. Eight of them (73%) came from Hong Kong and the teachers had shared in their interview that there is a group of parents in the school who have students taking "music lessons, Chinese lessons, swimming lessons, skating lessons and Kumar Math" and that they likely share information about their children's education during these activities. These children may also have established a network of friends among other students in the school, through these activities, and be more motivated to apply to the District Specified Alternative Program to be with these friends. Other parents with a high school education were less aware of the choice that was available, did not consider it to be of greater educational value, or did not feel it was the best choice for their child.

Of the four fathers who had completed an apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school, only one (25%) chose to make an application to Killarney's Mini School; the other three chose

the regular program. One of the two fathers (50%) who had attended community college chose the mini school; the other chose the neighbourhood program. Seven fathers in this community had completed a bachelors degree. Four of these fathers (57%) chose to apply to the mini school. Five fathers from Eastling reported completing a graduate or professional degree. Three of these (60%) chose the mini school program. Overall, in a population in which 36% of the fathers had a university degree, 50% of those fathers choosing to make an application to Killarney's mini school had attended university.

None of the mothers with less than a high school diploma chose to have their child apply to Killarney Mini School. However five of the twelve mothers who had a high school diploma decided to make this application, representing 38% of the mothers choosing an alternate educational program. Obviously these mothers managed to become informed about the program itself and the rather involved application procedure. The mother who had completed an apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school chose the neighbourhood school for her child. Only one of the eight mothers with a community college diploma or certificate chose to make an application to Killarney's mini school; the other seven (88%) elected to have their children attend Killarney Secondary School. It is at the university level that mothers whose children attend Eastling appear to be most active in making alternative choices. Six of the seven mothers (86%) who had completed a bachelor's degree and all three of the mothers with a graduate or professional degree elected to have their children apply to Killarney Mini School. One of the mothers with a bachelors degree was a single mother. Another was married to a high school graduate. The other seven mothers with university degrees were married to men who also had university degrees. Killarney's mini school was overwhelmingly the choice of the most highly educated couples at Eastling.



### *Comparison of School Choices by Level of Parental Education*

This study shows a strong relationship between the level of education completed by the parents and the likelihood of their choosing a District Specified Alternative Program or other educational option at Eastling, but not at Westview.

At Westview, parents with higher levels of education were more likely than parents with a similar level of education at Eastling to choose the neighbourhood high school. It may be that the general perception among parents who have completed higher levels of education at Westview is that Lord Byng is a desirable school, with or without the enrichment available through the Arts Mini School, and they were comfortable making that choice for their children. Parents with medium levels of education at Westview were more likely than their Eastling counterparts to choose alternative programs. This may be because at Westview the parents with fewer years of education, and their children, were generally more aware of options that are available, either through their own research or through networks of acquaintances at the school who had some knowledge of the alternative school programs that are available.

Parents with higher levels of education at Eastling were much more likely to choose alternative programs. Sixteen of the twenty-two parents at Eastling who had completed university degrees (73%) chose an alternative educational program for their children. This compares to just fifteen of thirty-six university-educated parents (42%) at Westview. If we consider only fathers at the two schools, nine of the twenty-one university-educated fathers at Westview (43%) chose educational options, compared to seven of the twelve fathers with a university degree (58%) at Eastling. Of the fifteen university-educated mothers at Westview, only six (40%) made alternative educational choices for their children, compared with nine out of ten (90%) of the university-educated mothers at Eastling. For mothers at Eastling who have completed a university degree, the Killarney Mini School appears to be a school choice that they

find attractive. These statistics reflect those reported in the Scottish study done by Echols (1990), which showed that in working-class neighbourhoods, parents with the highest level of schooling were almost twice as likely to have made a choice of state schools than were parents with the lowest level. The same does not appear to be true on the more affluent west side of Vancouver, at least among the participants in this survey.

### *Parents' Occupations and School Choice*

Echols' study (1990) also found that parents who exercised choice were likely to have more prestigious occupations than those who sent their children to the designated school). As with level of education, occupation is important to an analysis of equity of choice both because it is an indicator of socioeconomic status and because of the assumption that parents with more prestigious occupations will make more informed choices in the education of their children, with respect to choosing paths that will lead to more prestigious occupations for their children.

Defining prestige among occupations is both difficult and value-laden. In our society is it more prestigious to be a professional hockey player or a surgeon? How does the occupational prestige of a financial advisor compare to a lawyer, an architect, or a university professor? A variety of scales exist which attempt to rank occupational prestige, but they are imprecise and frequently are not sufficiently up-to-date to include newly-emerging occupations, particularly in the area of information technology. So I approach this section with some apprehension, knowing that it will be open to challenge from readers with differing definitions of prestige and the means used to rank occupations according to what must always be an artificial and imprecise scale. However, several studies, using a variety of definitions of occupational prestige, have concluded that parents who make alternative choices in public education have more "prestigious"

occupations than those who remain in the neighbourhood school and I wondered if my data supported this conclusion.

For the purposes of analysis, I used the job categories listed in the Pineo-Porter-McRoberts socioeconomic classification of occupations used in the 1981 Canadian census. I then divided the sixteen classifications into three categories: High Prestige, including self-employed professionals, employed professionals, high-level management, and semi professionals; Medium Prestige, including technicians, middle management, supervisors, foremen and women, skilled clerical, sales, and service occupations, and skilled crafts and trades; Low Prestige, including semi-skilled and unskilled clerical, sales, and service occupations, and manual labourers. One consideration I used to establish the three categories was the level of education reported by the majority of parents in these occupations. In taking this information into account, I was assuming that parents reporting higher levels of education might be using that education in performing their job, although I know that in the case of some of the immigrants at Eastling, this is not true. Two Eastling parents from Indonesia reporting a graduate level education were working as a shop server and a custodian at UBC. Their occupations do not reflect their level of education. Once again, I considered the occupational prestige of fathers and mothers independently, to see if this variable was significant. I also included those parents who indicated they were not employed or were homemakers, at the bottom of each chart. Table 5, below, summarizes the occupations of all the fathers and mothers in the study, and shows the difference between the occupational prestige of parents choosing alternative programs and parents electing to send their child to the neighbourhood high school.

Table 5

## Occupational Prestige of Parents Choosing Alternative Programs or Regular Programs in Neighbourhood Schools

School Choice	Fathers		Mothers		Total	
	A	N	A	N	A	N
Occupation	%	%	%	%	%	%
High Prestige:						
Self-employed professionals	22	6	4	3	13	4
Employed professionals	7	11	14	5	11	8
High level management	4	11	0	5	2	8
Semi professionals	4	6	17	5	11	6
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>26</b>
Medium Prestige:						
Technicians	11	0	0	3	5	2
Middle management	11	9	4	5	7	7
Supervisors	7	3	4	8	5	6
Foremen and Women	4	3	0	0	2	2
Skilled clerical, sales, and service	7	3	4	5	5	4
Skilled crafts and trades	0	3	0	3	0	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>
Low Prestige:						
Semi-skilled clerical, sales, service	11	11	17	11	14	11
Semi-skilled manual	0	14	0	3	0	8
Unskilled clerical, sales, service	7	0	0	3	4	2
Unskilled manual	4	6	7	3	5	2
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>23</b>
Not employed	0	11	0	0	0	7
Homemaker	0	0	31	38	16	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

A = Alternative Program N = Neighbourhood High School (Regular Program)

The data show that parents who selected alternative programs were more likely to work at occupations with high prestige than those who chose to send their child to the neighbourhood school. This was equally true of fathers and mothers. As a whole, parents were equally likely to report having medium or low-prestige occupations, regardless of their school choice. However, there is a difference when fathers' and mothers' occupations are considered separately. Fathers who chose alternative programs were more than twice as likely as those choosing the neighbourhood school to report occupations of medium prestige. Mothers who chose alternative programs were half as likely as mothers who chose the neighbourhood school to work at medium-prestige occupations. None of those parents who indicated they were unemployed chose an alternative program. Only mothers indicated they were homemakers; no fathers put themselves in this category. Mothers who chose the neighbourhood school were slightly more likely than those who chose alternative programs to report that they were not employed outside the home.

As with the level of parental education, parents at Westview generally were employed in jobs with higher occupational prestige than those at Eastling. It is likely that these two variables – education and occupational prestige – are closely related although, as mentioned above, several of the parents whose children attended Eastling reported levels of education that did not reflect the prestige of their occupation. Since all of these parents indicated that the language usually spoken in the home was not English, I could not help but wonder if they were employed below their level of expertise due either to an insufficient command of English or non-recognition of their educational credentials in Canada. Working at occupations with higher prestige is likely also related to the level of income required to purchase a house on the far-more-expensive west side of Vancouver and is an indicator of the relative socioeconomic status of the parents whose children attend Westview and those whose children go to Eastling.

Table 6

## Occupational Prestige of Parents Whose Children Attended Westview and Eastling

Elementary School:	Fathers		Mothers	
	Westview	Eastling	Westview	Eastling
Occupation	%	%	%	%
High Prestige:				
Self-employed professionals	24	3	7	0
Employed professionals	10	9	13	6
High level management	14	3	7	0
Semi professionals	7	3	17	6
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>12</b>
Medium Prestige:				
Technicians	0	9	3	0
Middle management	17	3	10	0
Supervisors	4	6	7	6
Foremen and Women	4	3	0	0
Skilled clerical, sales, and service	7	3	0	8
Skilled crafts and trades	4	0	0	3
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>
Low Prestige:				
Semi-skilled clerical, sales, service	4	18	7	19
Semi-skilled manual	0	12	12	3
Unskilled clerical, sales, service	0	6	0	3
Unskilled manual	1	9	9	6
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>31</b>
Not employed	4	12	0	0
Homemaker	0	0	27	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

The data show that fathers whose children attended Westview were more than three times as likely to work at occupations with high occupational prestige than those whose children attended Eastling. Mothers from Westview were almost four times as likely to work at high prestige occupations than mothers from Eastling. Mothers at Eastling were more likely to report that they were homemakers than their Westview counterparts. The question that is pertinent to this study, however, is how the disparity in occupational prestige between these two elementary school communities influences choices made when considering high school programs.

Table 7

Comparison of Occupational Prestige of Parents Choosing High School Programs

Fathers' Occupational Prestige				
Elementary School: High School Choice:	Westview		Eastling	
	Alternative	Neighbourhood	Alternative	Neighbourhood
Occupational Prestige	%	%	%	%
High	54	56	21	16
Medium	46	25	35	16
Low	0	13	43	47
Not employed	0	6	0	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
Mothers' Occupational Prestige				
Elementary School: High School Choice:	Westview		Eastling	
	Alternative	Neighbourhood	Alternative	Neighbourhood
Occupational Prestige	%	%	%	%
High	54	35	19	5
Medium	8	30	13	20
Low	23	0	25	35
Homemaker	15	35	44	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

*Occupational Prestige and Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Westview School*

Fathers whose jobs rated high on the prestige scale and whose children attended Westview were slightly more likely to choose the neighbourhood high school than they were to select an alternative program. The split is, in fact, exactly the same as for those Westview fathers who hold graduate or professional degrees, which reflects the fact that the high-prestige jobs performed by these fathers require higher levels of education. The relationship between occupational prestige and school choice for fathers at Westview was much more pronounced at the lower end of the occupational scale. None of the fathers at Westview choosing an alternative program either had an occupation with low prestige or was not employed.

Mothers at Westview in general were not employed at occupations as prestigious as their husbands. However, the majority of those choosing to apply to an alternative program did have occupations with high prestige, if they worked outside the home. It is interesting that, among the mothers choosing the neighbourhood school, none were employed at low-prestige occupations. However, they were more than twice as likely as mothers choosing alternative programs to report that they were not currently working outside the home.

*Occupational Prestige and Choices Made by Parents Whose Children Attended Eastling School*

Fathers whose children attended Eastling and who chose to apply to an alternative program were more likely than those whose children were going to the neighbourhood school to work at occupations with high or medium prestige and were slightly less likely to have a job with low prestige. None of the fathers choosing an alternative program indicated that he was currently unemployed, as were four of the fathers who chose the neighbourhood school.



Mothers from Eastling who chose an alternative program were almost four times as likely to work at a high-prestige occupation than those who chose the neighbourhood school and fewer worked at low-prestige jobs. The pattern noted on the west side of the city – of homemakers being twice as likely to choose the neighbourhood school – is not true at this east-side school. For both groups of mothers, a significant proportion indicated that they were currently not employed outside of the home.

#### *Comparison of School Choices by Prestige of Parents' Occupations*

In this study, parents who chose to apply to alternative programs were more likely than parents who sent their children to the neighbourhood school to report that they were employed in jobs with high occupational prestige. The exception to this pattern was among fathers at Westview. In this group of well- educated and highly-employed fathers, occupational prestige did not distinguish those who chose alternative programs. However, even in this group, no fathers who chose alternative programs had low-prestige occupations or were unemployed.

Other studies have indicated that this tendency for parents with more prestigious occupations to make school choices may be due to these parents' knowledge about what is required in order for their child to gain the skills necessary to obtain a more prestigious job in the future. Making alternative choices may also reflect the networks of information these well-connected parents use when making decisions about high school programs. On the other hand, a couple of conversations with parents at the mini school information meetings indicated that, for some parents, having your child apply to a mini school program is a means of "keeping up with the Joneses" and perhaps this is more of a motivating factor for parents with more prestigious occupations. I had a conversation with a friend whose children were attending a Shaughnessy elementary school in which there is both French Immersion and an English program. She shared with me that other parents criticized her for not enrolling her children in the more elite French

Immersion stream, even though she had considered the option and decided it was not in the best interests of her child. It may be the case that parents who work at more prestigious occupations, like my friend and the mother at the Tupper Mini School meeting, face more pressure from their peers when making school decisions.

At Eastling, although there was a tendency for fathers who choose the mini school to work at higher prestige occupations than those choosing the neighbourhood school, most worked at medium or low-prestige jobs. As mentioned, this may be because some relatively well-educated parents are underemployed and, therefore, behaving more as they would if they were employed in a job more suitable to their educational level. It may also be that parents at Eastling who work at lower prestige occupations consider education to be an important means for their children to obtain better jobs than their parents. Such an upwardly-mobile aspiration is common among immigrants, who have brought their children to Canada specifically for the educational and occupational advantages that such a move makes possible. These parents may believe that the mini school at Killarney will give their child even more of an advantage, educationally and in terms of earning university scholarships, and help them gain entrance to post-secondary institutions that might otherwise be beyond their means, intellectually and economically.

#### *Sources of information Used by Parents Choosing High School Programs*

The relationship between school choice and socioeconomic status noted above reflects what has been determined in many other studies involving school choice. Among the parents who completed this survey, it appears that those who chose District Specified Alternative Programs were more likely to have a higher level of educational achievement, particularly on the east side of the city, and more prestigious occupations than parents who chose to send their children to the neighbourhood high school. Archbald (1996) believes that "more educated

parents are likely to be more vigilant about information on educational opportunities in systems with school choice" (p. 153) and Ambler (1994) cautions that "social classes differ markedly in motivation, in the costs in time and effort required to acquire information about educational options, and indeed in capacity to understand and evaluate information once collected" (p. 372). This awareness of and appreciation for the information that is available about different educational opportunities is part of what Bourdieu calls social capital. Many studies have noted the value of social capital to the parents that possess it and use it on behalf of their children.

Another aspect which may contribute to the likelihood of a particular family opting for an educational alternative is the quantity and quality of the information networks used by parents to learn about such options. One explanation frequently offered for the socioeconomic disparity between parents who choose educational alternatives and those who do not is that parents who have more years of formal education and more prestigious occupations have networks of acquaintances who are university educated and therefore are more able than others to acquire information about high school programs and to evaluate the choices that are offered.

Jeffrey Henig (1999) suggests that "less-well-educated parents depend on information networks of poorer quality: They talk to fewer people about schools and those they talk to are more likely to be relatives and less likely to have a college education" (p. 75). Annette Lareau (1989) also found that

networks, themselves linked to social class positions, provide parents with different amounts of general information about schooling. Upper-middle class parents had teachers, resource specialists, principals, counselors, and special education teachers among their aunts, uncles, sisters-in-law, grandparents, friends, and neighbors. By contrast, working-class parents had gas station attendants, carpenters, convenience store salespersons, janitors, factory workers, and policemen among their relatives and neighbors. (p. 172-3)

The connections that facilitate the acquisition of information about educational opportunities constitute what Bourdieu calls social capital. Andres (1994) explains that

Social capital consists of social obligations or "connections." Two criteria determine the volume of the social capital a given agent has at her or his disposal: first, the size of the network of connections that the agent can effectively mobilize; and second, the volume of capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed by each of those to whom the agent is connected. (p. 123)

In other words, when assessing the social capital reflected in the sources of information used by parents when choosing high school options, it is important to note not only the quantity of the connections being made, but the quality of the information likely to be conveyed by each source.

My survey provided parents with a list of statements concerning sources of information which they might have found influential when making high school choices. Parents indicated the extent to which they agreed that these sources of information were important to them when seeking information about the programs available to their child. To analyze the sources of information used by parents, I recorded parents' responses to the survey question "To what extent do you agree with the following statements?" They considered a list of fourteen statements concerning sources of information that might have proved to be influential in their decision-making. Their choices of response for each criterion were: Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree. Their responses are summarized on Table 8.

Table 8

Extent to which Parents Agreed with Statements Concerning the Sources of Information that Influenced their Choice of High School

High School Choice Made:	<u>Alternative Program</u>				<u>Neighbourhood School</u>			
Extent of Agreement with Statement:	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Sources of Information</b>								
Child's teacher provided most information	7	36	43	14	17	28	42	14
Meetings at elementary school gave a lot of high school information	11	43	36	11	11	44	36	8
Information from high school teachers and counselors was very helpful	3	17	66	14	6	22	56	17
High School meetings affected choice	7	10	72	10	19	33	36	11
Mini School meetings influenced decision	7	14	62	17	27	46	23	4
The Internet was a valuable resource	7	32	50	11	13	25	50	13
Brochures gave a lot of information	10	28	55	7	12	24	55	9
Advice from parents at elementary school helped make decision	10	38	45	7	9	40	46	6
Parents of high school students influenced choice of schools	7	28	55	10	6	40	46	9
High school students gave advice	3	14	76	7	8	19	58	14
Child's opinion was important	0	0	45	55	0	11	50	39
Family friends influenced choice	3	34	55	7	11	32	46	11
Family members were important	7	18	57	18	9	41	32	18
Business associates helped choose	29	54	14	4	28	61	8	3

SD = Strongly Disagree D = Disagree A = Agree SA = Strongly Agree

### *Sources of Information used by Parents*

Parents from both schools who chose alternative programs indicated that a wider variety of sources were influential when learning about what programs were available. Eighty-two percent of these parents agreed or strongly agreed that information nights at the high school affected their choice of schools. Only 47% of the parents choosing the neighbourhood school felt as strongly about the importance of the high school meeting. Seventy-nine percent of the parents applying to the mini schools agreed or strongly agreed that mini school meetings influenced their decision, compared with just 27% of the parents who did not make this choice. Parents who applied to alternative programs also indicated that they found information from high school students, teachers, and parents more influential than parents who chose the neighbourhood school. In order to gain access to these sources of information, parents had to take the initiative to look beyond the elementary school. They had to become informed about meeting times and make connections with knowledgeable individuals who could provide them with the information they needed to make an informed choice among the programs offered.

Most important of all, however, was the child's opinion. Walford (1994) comments that research shows "a child's preference of school was more likely to be cited as a reason for the final choice by those parents in skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations than by professional, employer/manager and semi-professional classifications." (p. 119). In my study, there was no such class division. All of the parents who chose alternative programs either agreed or strongly agreed that their child's opinion was very important when making their decision. This was also true of 89% of those who chose the neighbourhood school, regardless of their area of residence, level of education or occupation. The least influential source of information for both groups was business associates and co-workers.

Table 9

Extent to which Parents from Westview and Eastling Agreed with Statements Concerning Sources of Information that Influenced their High School Choice

High School Choice: Elementary School: Extent of Agreement with Statement:  Sources of Information	Alternative Program								Neighbourhood School							
	Westview				Eastling				Westview				Eastling			
	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA	SD	D	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Child's teacher provided most information	8	46	38	8	7	27	47	20	31	38	19	13	5	20	60	15
Meetings at elementary school gave information	8	38	38	15	13	47	33	7	25	56	13	6	0	35	55	10
High school teachers & counselors were helpful	0	23	62	15	6	13	69	13	13	31	31	25	0	15	75	10
High School meetings affected choice	0	8	77	15	13	13	69	6	13	19	50	19	25	45	25	5
Mini School meetings influenced decision	8	15	54	23	6	13	69	13	22	44	33	0	29	47	18	6
The Internet was a valuable resource	8	42	42	8	6	25	56	13	25	17	33	25	5	30	60	5
Brochures gave a lot of information	15	31	54	0	6	25	56	13	21	14	57	7	5	32	53	11
Parents at elementary school helped decide	0	54	31	15	19	25	56	0	19	38	44	0	0	42	47	11
Parents of high school students influenced	8	31	46	15	6	25	63	6	6	38	50	6	5	42	42	11
High school students gave advice	8	15	69	8	0	13	81	6	13	13	75	0	5	25	45	25
Child's opinion was important	0	0	46	54	0	0	44	56	0	6	63	31	0	15	40	45
Family friends influenced choice	8	46	46	0	0	25	63	13	12	29	53	6	10	35	40	15
Family members were important	8	23	54	15	7	13	60	20	13	53	33	0	5	32	32	32
Business associates helped choose	31	54	15	0	27	53	13	7	29	65	6	0	26	58	11	5

SD = Strongly Disagree   D = Disagree   A = Agree   SA = Strongly Agree

SD = Strongly Disagree D = Disagree A = Agree SA = Strongly Agree

### *Comparison of the Sources of Information used by Parents at Westview and Eastling*

Parents at Eastling who chose the Killarney Mini School indicated that they used even more sources of information than parents at Westview. In addition to the network listed above, 80% of them agreed or strongly agreed that family members strongly influenced their choice of schools. They also agreed or strongly agreed that information found on the internet and in brochures from the school board were useful when making a decision. While parents at Westview also used these sources of information, they were less important in their decision-making. Other parents were also cited as helpful sources more often by parents from Eastling.

Parents who elected to send their children to the neighbourhood high school did not indicate that they used as many different sources of information as those choosing alternatives. At Eastling, 85% of the parents choosing the neighbourhood high school agreed or strongly agreed that the child's opinion and advice from high school teachers were influential sources of information. At Westview, the child's opinion was supplemented with other students' opinions. However, 69% of the parents at Westview who chose the neighbourhood high school also agreed or strongly agreed that they found meetings at the high school to have been informative, while only 30% of the parents at Eastling agreed or strongly agreed. Eastling parents may have been less likely to attend the meeting at Killarney because of a language barrier. They would have to depend much more upon their child's interpretation of what was being said at the school, as well as information from older siblings and friends with whom they could communicate.

Seventy-five percent of the Eastling parents who chose Killarney also agreed or strongly agreed that the Grade 7 teacher provided most of their information about high school programs, while just 32% of the parents at Westview who chose their neighbourhood school agreed or strongly agreed with the importance of information from Grade 7 teachers. It was interesting that all of the parents at Eastling who agreed most strongly that the Grade 7 teacher provided



most of their information were those who had not completed high school. Eighty-five percent of these parents also agreed or strongly agreed that high school teachers were helpful. This deference to the opinion of the teacher as an education professional was also noted by Lareau in her study. She observed at the more working-class school in her study that "parents were heavily dependent upon the teachers for the information which they received about school" (p. 116). Perhaps this dependence also indicates a relative lack of other available sources of information. These same parents indicated that the balance of their information was most likely to come from their own child and from other high school students. It is unlikely that either of these sources of information would be able to provide parents with a comprehensive overview of the programs available. These parents were less likely to report that they had received valuable information from meetings at the high school about either the regular or mini school program. This makes it even more important for teachers at working-class schools to ensure that information about high school programs is being distributed to all parents in a way that they can understand it. Family members also influenced school decisions more for Eastling than Westview parents, whether or not they chose alternative programs. Again, this may have reflected a closer tie to a cultural and linguistic community at Eastling than at Westview.

In the Westview teacher interview, Anne explained that it is their practice to approach former students who are attending alternative programs and ask if they would speak with interested parents about the program. This might also be valuable for parents at Eastling, particularly if the students speaking to the parents can communicate in languages other than English and within the cultural contexts that represent the parent community. Inviting high school parents in to speak with the elementary school parents would also be a means of providing a network for parents who may be less familiar with the English language and British Columbian school policies. In this way, schools can ensure that the school's reputation, both

academically and in terms of safety, is being reported accurately, rather than spread about through innuendo or stories passed along from “a friend of a friend”.

### *Criteria Used to Evaluate High School Programs*

Finally, I asked parents to indicate, from a list of thirty-four criteria, those that were most important when choosing the high school program that would best suit the needs and interests of their son or daughter. These criteria included academic considerations, such as the academic program itself, academic honours and achievements of students at the school, university scholarships awarded to students at the school, enriched learning opportunities and involvement in academic competitions. Other curricula, such as Fine Arts, Athletics, and Vocational/Technical Programs were listed, as well. Possible criteria also included extra academic support and English language instruction for students who require assistance. Issues of personal safety, bullying, drugs and alcohol were listed, as well as such pragmatic considerations as keeping the child with friends and siblings, ease of travel, and the general appearance of the school. For each of the thirty-five criteria, parents were asked to rate it as Not at all Important, Somewhat Important, Very Important or Extremely Important. I then compared the results between parents who chose alternative programs and those who chose the neighbourhood school, as well as between parents at Westview and at Eastling.

The primary rationale for offering increased school choice, from the point of view of the Ministry of Education, is that “it all comes down to improving student achievement – the central focus of the entire education system” (“Frequently Asked Questions, p. 2). Student achievement, however that is measured, may well be the primary focus of the Ministry of Education but, as a parent, I wondered if parents choosing high schools would be as focused on their child’s achievement as they were on other, more pragmatic issues.

I suspected that knowledgeable parents might show concern about such issues as class size and support for students needing learning assistance or instruction in English as a Second Language. Given the diminished resources currently available in school board budgets, many schools are struggling to maintain current levels of service and I wondered how parents might take this into consideration when choosing high school programs.

Judging from media attention to the issue and comments heard during the mini school meetings, I also wondered if parents were concerned about safety issues in the schools, which might over-ride their willingness to send their children to some high schools, regardless of the excellence of the academic programs offered. While I did not ask whether parents would be willing to send their children from the west side of Vancouver to an elite academic program at an inner-city school, I did inquire how important location might be to their final decision.

Given the importance parents attributed to their child's opinion when citing sources of information used in selecting a high school program, I wondered what criteria would emerge as being important from the child's point of view. I expected that staying with schools friends and not having to travel extensively to get to school each day might become significant if the child's preference were considered important.

I also wondered if parents would be influenced by schools' reputations for academic excellence or safety. I wondered how they would evaluate a school's reputation and whether measures such as the report published by the Fraser Institute would be significant in their decision making. Some comments from parents at the mini school meetings indicated that this information is well known among parents; I wondered about its relative importance in their decision making about high school programs. Parents' responses to questions of how important these criteria were in their decision-making are summarized on Table 10.

Table 10

Degree to Which Parents Agreed that the following Criteria were Important when Considering a High School Program for their Child

High School Choice Made:	Alternative Program				Neighbourhood			
	Not	Some	Very	Extremely	Not	Some	Very	Extremely
Importance of each Criterion:	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Academic Considerations</b>								
School's academic program	0	7	38	55	0	22	54	24
School's academic reputation	0	24	21	55	0	25	42	33
Fraser Institute's rating of school	28	17	38	17	19	35	38	8
Students' academic honours	7	14	34	45	5	27	38	30
University scholarships awarded to students	7	21	17	55	5	27	38	30
Enriched learning opportunities	3	17	41	38	9	17	43	31
Advanced Placement or I.B. programs	10	24	45	21	17	36	42	6
Academic competitions (e.g. Pascal)	17	21	31	31	30	24	32	14
FSA results of high school students	10	17	52	21	5	41	46	8
<b>Non-Academic Curricula</b>								
Fine arts courses	0	41	41	17	5	51	27	16
School's athletic program (e.g. P.E)	3	59	31	7	3	41	38	19
Vocational/Technical program	14	55	28	3	19	35	32	14
Use of computer technology	3	24	41	31	8	22	49	22
<b>Extra-Curricular Activities</b>								
Extra-curricular activities (e.g. clubs)	3	24	55	17	8	27	49	16
Service opportunities (e.g. fund raising)	14	48	24	14	14	51	27	8
Leadership opportunities	7	31	45	17	14	35	46	5
Athletic Teams	14	69	14	3	14	49	22	16
Extended field trip experiences	7	31	41	21	16	41	24	19
<b>Learning Conditions</b>								
Quality of teaching	0	0	10	90	0	5	38	57
Class size	3	7	52	38	0	30	38	32
Availability of Learning Assistance	17	21	45	17	11	30	43	16
Availability of extra learning support	7	34	45	14	5	41	35	19
Availability of E.S.L. instruction	41	14	31	14	46	14	22	19
<b>Safety Issues</b>								
School's Reputation for Safety	0	3	28	69	3	19	46	32
Concerns about bullying	0	7	21	72	5	11	38	46
Concerns about drugs and alcohol	3	7	21	69	3	8	27	62
<b>Other Considerations</b>								
Keeping child with school friends	0	24	41	34	5	16	49	30
Keeping child with siblings	21	25	36	18	23	29	34	14
Location of the school	0	21	52	28	5	16	49	30
Ease of travel to school	3	21	55	21	5	22	49	24
Physical appearance of school	25	39	32	4	14	51	19	16
Special facilities (e.g. pool)	10	52	17	21	16	54	24	5
School teaches values similar to family	3	24	45	28	6	39	39	17
Culturally diverse community	4	29	50	18	17	42	31	11

Not = Not at all Important; Some = Somewhat Important; Very = Very Important; Extremely = Extremely Important

### *Criteria Used to Select a High School*

There were a number of criteria that were common to all parents considering high school programs, regardless of whether they applied to an alternative program or enrolled in the neighbourhood school. For all parents in this study, when considering high school programs for their child the number one consideration was the quality of teaching. Ninety-five percent of the parents choosing the neighbourhood high school and 100% of the parents choosing an alternative program considered quality of teaching to be very or extremely important. One parent, an instructor at a community college, wrote on her survey "ultimately it is the teachers that matter to me, their personal qualities and gifts." Another mother observed that "the quality of teaching and the dedication of the teachers rates first in our choice of high school." I wondered how parents get information about quality of teaching and how this affected their choice, since it was almost equally important to those enrolling in the neighbourhood high school and those applying to an alternative program. Perhaps this is an affirmation of high school teaching in general or perhaps it indicates a level of anxiety about the ability of teachers to teach enthusiastically and effectively as class sizes increase and support for students decreases.

The second most important consideration for parents involved issues of student safety. Ninety-seven percent of those parents choosing alternative programs indicated that concerns about the school's reputation for personal safety were very important or extremely important. This compares with 87% of the parents choosing the neighbourhood school, but both sets of parents also listed concerns about drugs and alcohol and concerns about bullying near the top of their list of considerations. I am not aware that either Lord Byng or Killarney have a negative reputation for student safety, but I know that questions about the safety of the school environment also came up at the mini school meeting at Tupper and from parents who had heard that there were concerns at some Vancouver high schools.

At the Tupper Mini School meeting, although the teachers were clear that they considered Tupper Secondary School to be a safe environment, and went on to describe the programs in place in the school, they did feed the general fear by saying that they had taught at other schools that they considered to be unsafe. They declined to name the schools but I am sure that some parents were left with the impression that this is an issue they need to consider when choosing schools. Their fear may be attributable, in part, to the sensational news coverage always received by violent incidents in schools, wherever in the world they occur. It also may be more likely to concern parents who are sending their first child to high school, although this was also an issue among parents who indicated that they had older siblings already attending high school and who might have some inside knowledge about the school culture. Either way, this is obviously an issue that should be addressed directly in high school meetings, to reassure parents that it is also important to high school teachers and administrators and there are plans in place to deal with safety issues. Furthermore, it needs to be addressed in a manner that does not suggest that other schools may not be as safe, feeding the general feeling of unease about high school safety.

Location and ease of travel to the school were almost equally important to both groups of parents. Eighty percent of the parents choosing alternative programs and 79% of parents enrolling in the neighbourhood high school indicated that the location of the school is very or extremely important to them. It needs to be remembered that, unlike other studies done internationally, most parents in this study were not using school choice as a means of leaving the neighbourhood school to attend a more academically-desirable school. The overwhelming majority, on both the east and west sides of the city, were choosing to apply either to the neighbourhood high school or to the mini school within their local high school. When they indicate that location is important, I take this to mean that they prefer their child to attend the school in their own community.

This may challenge the assumption being made by the Ministry of Education that parents would be willing to transport their child around the district in order to attend a magnet school. It may be more accurate to suggest that parents would be interested in locally-developed programs within their neighbourhood school. These would not have to be academically elite. Parents at many of the mini school meetings were also interested in knowing about the school's fine arts programs, the technical education available, and the possibility of participating in extended field trips. Perhaps it would be more worthwhile for the Ministry of Education to work with the School Advisory Councils and discuss the development of programs within the school that would offer more choices without forcing parents to research the programs available and then remove their child from the neighbourhood school.

Finally, 75% of those choosing alternative programs and 79% of those enrolling in the neighbourhood school indicated that keeping their child with school friends was very or extremely important. Since the majority of parents also indicated their child's opinion was very important when making their decision, I would expect that remaining with a peer group would become an overriding consideration for many families when deciding between sending their child to the school that most of her or his friends attend or shopping around for a program in another neighbourhood. This reflects an observation made by Walford (1994) concerning how governments expect school choices to work and how parents and students function within a system offering choices. Walford states that

one of the main justifications used for greater choice of school is that (in a period of falling rolls) it will lead to popular schools thriving and unpopular ones closing. It is usually assumed that parental choices will be informed choices, such that it will be the 'bad' schools that close while the 'good' ones expand – leading to an overall raising of educational standards. However, there is little evidence for equating "popular" with "good" in terms of parental choices – many parents believe that the short-term happiness

of their child is the most important factor in choosing a school. There is even less evidence for equating "popular" with "good" in terms of the choices of 10-year-olds. It is likely that children will make their choice of school using criteria very different from those which a disinterested adult would use. This may mean that the child has a happier time at secondary school (which is not insignificant!), but it is not clear that these individual choices are actually in the best interests of the child or that the sum of many such choices will automatically lead to higher educational standards overall (p. 122).

These, then, are the common criteria that parents reported as being most important when they were choosing a high school program for their child: the quality of teaching; concerns about personal safety, bullying, drugs and alcohol; the location of the school program and maintaining peer relationships. When parents who chose alternative programs are compared to parents who chose the neighbourhood school, there are also some different criteria considered important.

#### *Criteria used to Select an Alternative Program*

Parents who chose to apply to District Specified Alternative Programs or other school options considered all of the above criteria, but gave some criteria a different emphasis. I expected that parents who chose alternative programs would be most interested in academic enrichment and, for the Byng Arts Mini School, the Fine Arts curriculum. While these were important criteria, they did fall behind other considerations.

As a group, 90% of the parents choosing alternative programs indicated that concern about class size was one of their most important criteria when making decisions. A few years ago, the mini schools admitted only twenty-eight to thirty students per year to each program. At the Byng Arts Mini School last year, after receiving one hundred and fifty applications for sixty positions, they were permitted by the school board to expand their enrollment, so that they could



admit thirty students into their Art Program, thirty into Music, and thirty into Drama. The individual class sizes were still capped at thirty students. While this might have been a higher than average enrollment a few years ago, it needs to be remembered that these thirty students would be hand-picked for their academic ability and their positive attitude towards learning; students who had behaviour issues or special learning needs would not be selected for the program. A class of thirty academically able and motivated students would be easier to teach than a smaller class that included just one or two students with special behaviour or learning needs. However, even these classes of thirty have become a thing of the past for the mini schools.

This year parents at the mini school meetings were told that the schools would be admitting as many as thirty-two students, in order to comply with the new district average enrollments for secondary classes. Even so, thirty-two motivated students still provides a more positive learning environment than a similar-sized class that contains students for whom support for their special learning needs – ESL, behaviour, or learning assistance – has been cut back due to budgetary constraints. Parents who are active in the Parent Advisory Council or who are listening to teaching professionals talk about their concerns with increasing class sizes and decreasing support for needy students may be aware of the advantage that a mini school environment will provide for their child. While 90% of the parents choosing an alternative program indicated that class size was very important or extremely important to them, only 70% of the parents choosing a neighbourhood school showed a similar level of concern. Whether this indicates a level of complacency on the part of parents enrolling in regular programs, a belief that class size is not an important issue, or an ignorance of the possible advantage of having their child in the mini school environment is unclear.

The school's academic program was more important to those choosing alternative programs than to those choosing the neighbourhood school. Ninety-three percent of those parents

choosing alternative programs and 78% of those parents choosing the neighbourhood high school indicated that the school's academic program was either very important or extremely important to them. Both sets of parents rated the importance of the school's reputation for academic excellence equally high. I wondered how the school's reputation might be measured, so included the Fraser Institute's rating as one of the possible criteria for evaluating high schools.

Interestingly, only 40% of the parents at Westview considered the Fraser Institute's rating to be important, compared with 58% of the parents at Eastling although, predictably, Lord Byng (21<sup>st</sup>) rated higher with the Fraser Institute than Killarney (77<sup>th</sup>). At any rate, given the fact that parents reported high school teachers, parents, and students among their most influential sources of information, I suspect that their evaluation of the high school's reputation was more multi-faceted than reports published by outside groups.

Parents choosing alternative programs also indicated that they were more interested than neighbourhood school registrants in knowing about academic honours and achievements of students at the school. This may indicate an awareness that students in the mini school programs tend to be over-represented in the scholastic honours awarded to some schools that contain a mini school program. At Point Grey, the administration was actually defensive about this perception and made a point of stating that students at Point Grey last year received seventy-seven scholarships, twenty-eight of which were won by students in the mini school. That is not an insignificant number, however, in a mini school class of thirty students (even acknowledging that some students will have received more than one scholarship). At the mini school meeting in Britannia, parents wanted to know what percentage of their mini school students go on to university. They were told that 90-100% of the students who proceed to the International Baccalaureate Program will be admitted to university, without having to write provincial exams. This is well above the average for the rest of the Britannia School population. Parents who attended mini school meetings frequently indicated that they were looking for a program with a

good track record for getting students into university programs and for enabling students to earn scholastic honours and achievements. This seemed to be less of a concern among parents choosing neighbourhood school programs.

Those, then, were the additional concerns of parents choosing alternate programs: class size; the academic program; academic honours and achievements. Parents who chose the neighbourhood high school did not list these as such high priorities, but had some other criteria that influenced their school choice.

#### *Criteria used to Select the Neighbourhood School*

For the parents who chose to enroll their child in the neighbourhood school, keeping their child with a peer group was equally significant with the academic program at the school. In general, although they indicated that they considered a wide variety of criteria, those choosing the neighbourhood school were more focused on issues like safety and teachers than on curricula and approaches to teaching. In a system offering a wider selection of school choices, I am unconvinced that the outcome would be significantly different. Parents will still tend to choose the school where they expect that their child will be most comfortable and safe before they consider the criteria that the government appears to believe are most important.

#### *Criteria used at Westview to Select a High School Program*

Although there was a great deal of agreement among parents on the east and west side of Vancouver concerning the criteria they consider when choosing a high school program, there were also some interesting differences., as shown on Table 11.

Table 11

Degree to which Parents from Westview and Eastling indicated that the following Criteria were Important when Considering a High School Program for their Child

High School Choice: Elementary School:	Alternative Program						Neighbourhood School					
	Westview			Eastling			Westview			Eastling		
Importance of each Criterion:	N %	S %	V %	E %	N %	S %	V %	E %	N %	S %	V %	E %
<b>Academic considerations</b>												
School's academic program	0	8	54	38	0	6	25	69	0	6	71	24
School's academic reputation	0	31	31	38	0	19	13	69	0	18	41	41
Fraser Institute's rating of school	46	15	8	31	13	19	63	6	24	35	29	12
Enriched learning opportunities	8	23	46	23	0	13	38	50	19	13	44	25
Advanced Placement or I.B. programs	23	38	23	15	0	13	63	25	31	31	31	6
Academic competitions (e.g. Pascal)	38	15	8	38	0	25	50	25	41	35	12	12
Students' academic honours	15	23	31	31	0	6	38	56	6	35	24	35
University scholarships awarded to students	15	31	23	31	0	13	13	75	6	47	24	24
FSA results of high school students	15	23	54	8	6	13	50	31	6	35	53	6
<b>Non-Academic Curricula</b>												
Fine arts courses	0	38	38	23	0	44	44	13	12	47	24	18
School's athletic program (e.g. P.E)	8	54	31	8	0	63	31	6	6	41	47	6
Vocational/Technical program	15	62	23	0	13	50	31	6	29	47	12	12
Use of computer technology	8	23	54	15	0	25	31	44	12	29	53	6
<b>Extra-Curricular Activities</b>												
Extra-curricular activities (e.g. clubs)	8	38	38	15	0	13	69	19	6	41	35	18
Service opportunities (e.g. fund raising)	23	31	23	23	6	63	25	6	29	47	18	6
Leadership opportunities	8	38	31	23	6	25	56	13	24	24	47	6
Athletic Teams	15	77	8	0	13	63	19	6	29	47	18	6
Extended field trip experiences	15	46	23	15	0	19	56	25	29	59	0	12

N = Not at all Important S = Somewhat Important V = Very Important E = Extremely Important

Table 11 (continued)

Degree to which Parents from Westview and Eastling indicated that the following Criteria were Important when Considering a High School Program for their Child

High School Choice: Elementary School:	Alternative Program						Neighbourhood School					
	Westview			Eastling			Westview			Eastling		
Importance of each Criterion:	N	S	V	E	N	S	V	E	N	S	V	E
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Learning Conditions</b>												
Quality of teaching	0	0	15	85	0	0	6	94	0	0	35	65
Class size	0	0	62	38	6	13	44	38	0	35	35	29
Availability of Learning Assistance	38	15	15	31	0	25	69	6	12	41	29	18
Availability of extra learning support	15	38	23	23	0	31	63	6	0	47	24	29
Availability of E.S.L. instruction	77	0	8	15	13	25	50	13	65	12	0	24
<b>Safety Issues</b>												
School's reputation for safety	0	8	31	62	0	0	25	75	0	18	41	41
Concerns about bullying	0	15	15	69	0	0	25	75	6	12	41	41
Concerns about drugs and alcohol	8	15	23	54	0	0	19	81	0	12	35	53
<b>Other Considerations</b>												
Keeping child with school friends	0	31	38	31	0	19	44	38	6	24	41	29
Keeping child with siblings	42	17	25	17	6	31	44	19	33	13	33	20
Location of the school	0	31	46	23	0	13	56	31	0	12	71	18
Ease of travel to school	0	31	38	31	6	13	69	13	0	18	65	18
Physical appearance of school	42	33	25	0	13	44	38	6	6	71	12	12
Special facilities (e.g. pool)	23	38	15	23	0	63	19	19	24	71	6	0
School teaches values similar to family	8	15	54	23	0	31	38	31	0	44	44	13
Culturally diverse community	8	17	67	8	0	38	38	25	18	53	24	6

N = Not at all Important S = Somewhat Important V = Very Important E = Extremely Important

Not surprisingly, the Fine Arts courses were considered more important by parents applying to the Byng Arts School than the Killarney Mini School. However, with only 61% of the parents listing them as very or extremely important, the fine arts courses were well below such other considerations as safety, academics, class size, and even keeping with school friends.

Parents at Westview who chose the neighbourhood school were more likely than those at Eastling to cite criteria involving location and ease of travel to the school. I suspect they would be unwilling to move their children very far from their attractive west-side neighbourhood, no matter how desirable a magnet school program might be, if transportation were difficult or they were uncomfortable with the safety of the neighbourhood in which the school was located.

#### *Criteria used at Eastling to Select a High School Program*

Eighty-eight percent of the parents who chose alternative programs at Eastling mentioned the importance of access to advanced placement courses, compared to just 39% of parents who applied to alternative programs from Westview. This may be because parents selecting the Byng Arts Mini School have a different focus for their child than the advanced placement courses, (which are also available at Lord Byng). It indicates, however, that these Eastling parents have an understanding of how advanced placement courses work and their value for students who are planning to attend university. I suspect that the majority of parents at Eastling who did not select the mini school program would be unaware of the existence of these enriched courses or of the academic advantage they may provide for students taking them.

Eighty-one percent of the parents choosing the Killarney Mini School also cited the Foundation Skills Assessment results as being an important criterion in their decision making. Gaining access to these results at the high school level would necessitate some research skills,

probably including an internet search, which indicates that these parents were likely using their higher level of education to search for information about their high school choices. Only 50% of the parents from Eastling who are enrolling their children in Killarney indicated that FSA results were important.

Finally, 88% of the parents at Eastling who applied to the mini school indicated that they considered "university scholarships awarded to students at the school" to be very or extremely important in their decision-making. This compare to 54% of the families from Westview. No doubt, for these east-side families, having the academic ability to qualify for university is only part of the challenge; funding a university education may also be more difficult for these families than for those on the west side of Vancouver.

Parents at Eastling who elected to send their children to Killarney were more likely, in addition to quality of teachers, concerns about safety, and staying with friends, to value the use of computers in the school. Eighty percent of these parents indicated that "the school's use of advanced computer technology" was important to their high school decision making, compared to just 59% at Westview. I am not sure whether computer technology is a feature at Killarney, but these parents seem to believe that it is an important aspect of their child's education. This interest in computers may reflect the fact that these parents had just completed a Parent Satisfaction Survey for the government and one of the biggest areas of dissatisfaction in Eastling's previous Satisfaction Survey was the lack of computer time. Parents at Eastling who had access to the FSA scores and parents at Westview in general likely have personal computers at home and probably have internet access, as well. This may not be true for many of the other families at Eastling. These same parents may be hampered at their jobs by their lack of computer skills and see this technology as another way for their children to get ahead in the job market.

### *Results of Applications Made to Alternative Programs*

I wondered how successful those students who applied to the mini school programs were and whether there might be a difference in the number of students from each school who were admitted into mini school programs. I followed up this study with phone calls to Westview and to Eastling, to ask about the high schools in which each group of students actually enrolled.

Table 12

Comparison of the High School Programs in which Students at Westview and at Eastling will be Enrolled in September, 2003

Elementary School	Westview	Eastling
	%	%
High School Program		
Mini School within the Neighbourhood High School	15	7
Other Mini Schools	3	1
Other Public School Alternative Programs	0	0
Private Schools	3	0
Out-of-Catchment High School	2	2
Neighbourhood High School	70	88
Not Yet Sure	7	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

At Westview I was told that out of a total of sixty-one students, thirty (49%) are enrolling in the neighbourhood school, Lord Byng, and thirteen (21%) will be attending University Hill or Kitsilano -- their designated high school. This means that 70% of the students going to high school from Westview ended up going to their neighbourhood high school. Nine students (15%) were accepted into the Byng Arts Mini School; they will make up 10% of the ninety students accepted into the program this fall. One student is going to Magee, meaning that one student (2%) crossed boundaries to attend another public high school. One student went to the Hamber



Challenge Program and one to Point Grey Mini School, so two (3%) students crossed boundaries to attend a District Specified Alternative Program. Two students are going to private schools and one was still waiting to hear if he had been accepted into the private school to which he applied, so three students (5%) were leaving, or hoping to leave, the public school system. One student moved to Saskatchewan, two had left the school and it is unknown where they will attend high school and three students were new to Westview since the survey and, according to the teacher passing on this information, they were ignorant of which high schools were an option, let alone where they were going. This will most likely mean that they, too, will be enrolling in the neighbourhood high school, as all other application dates are past by now. The actual high school enrollment -- 70% of students going to their neighbourhood school -- is slightly higher than the 57% who indicated that they had not applied to any alternate programs. The difference could be attributable to some students' not having been accepted into the alternative programs to which they applied and suggests my sample was probably fairly representative of the whole Grade 7 population, in spite of the 48% survey return rate.

Out of a total of eighty-two students at Eastling, seventy-two (88%) are attending Killarney Secondary School, the neighbourhood high school. Only six students (7%) were accepted into the Killarney Mini School, but they constitute 20% of that mini school class. This compares to 42% who applied to the mini school. This disparity could be due to my sample not being representative, but more likely reflects a high turn-down rate of applicants. Clearly there is a disparity in the spaces available to students from Westview and Eastling if they try to combine the option of attending their neighbourhood high school with the educational advantage of being part of a mini school program

Three of the students who were accepted into the mini school were from Sharon's class and three were from Tina's class. None of the eight students from Maureen's class who applied to the mini school was accepted. Given that six of the eight students from Maureen's class who

applied to the mini school were parents with the lowest level of education, I wondered about whether the selection process for the mini school created an even greater disparity between those students who could successfully choose the alternative program and those that could not. One student from Sharon's class was accepted into Gladstone Mini School and one student from Maureen's class was still on the waiting list for Gladstone, although she may end up going to Killarney, as well. One student was moving to Point Grey, although we were told at the mini school meeting at Point Grey that making a cross-boundary application to this popular secondary school was almost impossible, due to their overcrowding. One student was moving to McNeil Secondary School, in Richmond.

One student, needing a special placement due to learning difficulties, was still unsure where she was going to go. The options for students with special needs are more restricted at Eastling than at Westview. Parents from Westview who had a child with special needs applied to both the Prince of Wales Bridge Program and the Lord Byng Horizons Program. At Eastling, however, the staff member providing information about school placements wrote "we've given the family two Killarney [registration] forms, but they still seem to be unsure about where they are going. There is no class appropriate for [their child's] special needs at Killarney". The family seemed to get less explicit support in assessing and selecting an alternative program for their daughter than the family in similar circumstances at Westview.

It was more difficult for students from Eastling to get into the Killarney Mini School than it was for students from Westview to get into the Byng Arts Mini School. While 14% of the students at Westview got into their local mini school, only half as many (7%) were successful at Eastling. One obvious reason for this is that, while Killarney can only accept twenty-eight students into their program each year, Byng can accommodate as many as ninety. In addition to this, there are only five elementary schools feeding into Lord Byng, while there are six feeding into Killarney. Teachers and administrators at Killarney felt uncomfortable about turning down

such a large percentage of the applicants to their mini school. At the Britannia Venture meeting, parents were told that the program "could take two classes [of thirty students] if numbers permitted." It would appear that Killarney would have no trouble filling another mini school class if the school board would agree to open it. At Byng Arts Mini School, such expansion was achieved through lobbying from teachers.

### *Summary of Survey Results*

The two questions that this survey was designed to consider were (1) Is there a difference between parents who choose to apply to District Specified Alternative Programs and those who enroll their children in the neighbourhood high school? and (2) Could the difference be attributable to cultural and social capital (i.e. access to and the use of privileged information)?

Family residence did not have the effect that I had anticipated; slightly more families from Eastling School chose alternative programs than parents from Westview. However, the data show that the parents who chose to apply to the District Specified Alternative Programs did tend to have higher levels of education and more prestigious occupations than those who enrolled in the neighbourhood school. In terms of education, this was more true at Eastling than Westview. Nevertheless, there was a difference between parents who chose alternative programs and those who do not.

When considering the sources of information used by parents, those who chose alternative programs used more sources of information and were less likely to depend on the Grade 7 teacher to provide them with material. Parents who chose alternative programs, particularly at Eastling, were more likely to attend meetings, use the internet, and gain access to information from the school board (e.g. brochures) than those who enrolled in the neighbourhood high school.

The criteria used by parents who choose alternative programs included issues of class size and access to Advanced Placement programs and university scholarships. Placing these items higher on the list of important criteria indicates that parents who chose alternative programs were aware of many of the benefits that students in these programs have which may not be as available to students in the regular stream of the high school.

The District Specified Alternative Programs were designed to provide enrichment for students who could demonstrate that they are capable and motivated and that they would benefit from the enriched learning experience that can be offered in a small group setting. The question that this study must now pose is can these and similar programs be offered as choices, in times of fiscal restraint, in a way that will ensure that they are accessible in an equitable manner to all students who would benefit from their enrichment?

## Chapter VI – Conclusions and Recommendations

I began this study with two research questions: Do parents of Grade 7 students in Vancouver who choose to apply to District Specific Alternative Programs differ from parents who send their children to the neighbourhood high school? Could these differences be attributable to disparities in social or cultural capital as demonstrated by the sources of information and the criteria used by parents making high school choices?

### *Whose Parents?*

Many studies (Ambler, 1994; Ball et al., 1995; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Metz, 1986; Schwartz, 1994; Waslander & Thrupp, 1995; Whitty et al., 1998; Willms & Echols, 1997) support the assertion made by Archbald (1996) that with school choice “an important equity concern has to do with possible stratifying effects related to class, race, or geographic factors affecting parent choices” (p. 152). I began my evaluation of the equity of mini schools by looking for differences in the choices made by parents on the east and west sides of the city. I expected that parents on the west side of Vancouver would make more varied choices than those on the east side. While no parents on the east side of the city indicated that they were choosing private schools, I was surprised that the percentage of parents choosing alternatives to the regular program in their neighbourhood high school was almost equal. The Vancouver School Board’s policy of providing alternative programs at schools throughout the district appears to have had an equalizing effect on the numbers of parents who chose to apply to these programs on both sides of the city, at least among the parents in this study.

I also expected to discover that parents who chose the alternative programs tended to have a higher level of education than those who chose the regular program in their neighbourhood school. This educational inequity has been noted in several studies (Ambler,

1994; Willms & Echols, 1997; Witte, 2000). In this study, level of education proved to be more related to school choice among parents on the east side of Vancouver than on the west side. In a population containing a high percentage of parents with advanced post-secondary education, level of education does not appear to have a strong influence on the choice of an alternative program. Where there is a greater disparity in the level of parental educational, however, it does appear that the parents who choose alternative programs tend to be those who have completed university. Teachers may have an effect on this disparity. Parents with the lowest level of education in Maureen's class appeared to benefit from her approach to making information about programs more accessible to the students and parents.

Many studies (Ambler, 1994; Ball et al., 1995; Lauder, 1999; Willms & Echols, 1997) have indicated that those parents who choose alternative programs for their children tend to work at more prestigious occupations than those whose children attend neighbourhood high schools. While there was a slight tendency towards this on the west side of Vancouver, it was not as true on the east side. This may be due to the fact that many parents on the east side of the city are underemployed in relation to their level of education due to their lack of English language skills or their educational credentials not being recognized in Canada. It also appears that, in a community where the majority of parents are employed in working-class occupations, there is less disparity in the school to begin with.

Did parents who chose alternative programs have access to different networks of information than those who chose the neighbourhood school? I asked this question as a means of determining whether a parent's social capital might affect their school choice in the manner noted in other research (Andres, 1994; Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 1989; Walford, 1994). In this study, parents who chose alternative programs used a greater variety of sources of information than those who chose the neighbourhood school. Parents choosing alternative programs were more likely to talk to high school teachers and students and to attend meetings at the high school.

Parents choosing the neighbourhood high school were more likely to defer to the Grade 7 teacher's advice, particularly on the east side of the city, in a manner similar to that noted by Lareau (1989). All parents, however, indicated that their child had an important role to play in choosing their high school. Given the social nature of the average Grade 7 student, this likely means that students are going to show a preference for whatever program their friends are attending. Thus, the student's peer group may be a stronger predictor for which students will apply to alternative programs and which will attend the neighbourhood high school than any other consideration. This aspect of school choice reflects conclusions drawn by Walford (1994).

Finally, I was interested in discovering the criteria that parents indicated they used when assessing and choosing a high school program. Other research has noted that a difference in cultural capital was related to socioeconomic disparity in school choice (Andres, 1994; Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 1989; Ungerleider, 2003; Walford, 1994). Among those who chose alternative programs, I expected to find a strong indication that parents were concerned about the academic program and enriched learning opportunities, as these are the aspects of the programs that are emphasized at the mini school meetings. The most important consideration for both choosers and non-choosers, according to this survey, is the quality of teaching. One parent wrote on her survey that "ultimately it is the teachers that matter to me – their personal attributes and gifts". Another parent concurred that the most important criteria for her was "how good the teachers are (not necessarily academic excellence, but inspiring children to learn)". Close behind this criterion were concerns about their child's personal safety, amid threats of bullying, drugs, and alcohol.

There were, however, differences between the criteria considered important to parents choosing alternative programs and those choosing the neighbourhood school. In general, parents who chose alternative programs indicated that class size was an important criterion. These parents may have been more aware of the implications of having their child in a program that guarantees not just the size but the composition of the class in a way that can no longer be

assured in the general population of the neighbourhood high school. Given the growing class sizes and relative lack of support for students with special learning needs, having the ability to choose a program that is insulated from these concerns gives students an advantage of which not all parents seem equally aware. Parents choosing alternate programs also indicated that they considered academic honours achieved by students in the program to be important. Parents choosing alternative programs were informed at the mini school meetings that students in these programs tend to fare well on provincial exams and in obtaining university scholarships. The latter consideration was even more attractive to parents residing on the east side of the city, where affording a university education may be more difficult.

Parents choosing the neighbourhood high school were more likely to indicate that it was important to them that their child remain with friends. As is true of the sources of information used by parents, parents who chose the neighbourhood school appeared to consider fewer criteria as important to their decision making and those that they did consider tended to be more social than academic issues.

### *What Choices?*

Ungerleider (2003) explains that “the call for educational choice in Canada is fuelled by widely held misperceptions” (p. 178). Studies conducted in the United States (Archbald, 1996; Davis, 1994; Hoxby, 1998; Levin, 2000; Metz, 1986; Schwartz, 1994; ) indicate that school choice in that country is largely motivated by issues of racial segregation and inequitable learning conditions in underfunded inner-city schools – considerations that are less relevant in the schools of British Columbia. In Great Britain, the impetus for increased school choice, according to Willms and Echols (1997), was “to induce competition amongst schools that would lead them to improve performance and become more responsive to parents’ demands. Some



critics argued that part of the government's agenda was to secure a means of affecting contraction and reducing expenditures, without becoming closely involved in local politics" (p. 426). While all these considerations may be part of the agenda of the Ministry of Education's "New Era" in education, there is little evidence that competition leads to improved achievement or that parents in British Columbia are unanimous in their demand for more choice. This study indicates that the majority of parents would prefer to maintain their ties with a program in their neighbourhood school.

The term "school choice" has many different meanings. Whitty et al. (1998) explain that there are difficulties with defining the term choice, which may include "the concept of 'devolution', along with 'deregulation', 'dezoning', and... 'desegregation', meaning the replacement of collegiality, collectivity and cooperation with competitive individualism. In different contexts, choice can signify any, all or even none of these processes" (p. 10). In the context of the District Specified Alternative Programs choice really means that parents who have sufficient information about the process of making an application to one or more of these mini schools can choose to do so. Due to the high demand for these programs, once the application has been made the element of choice is transferred to the mini schools. Each school is permitted to set the criteria and administer its own process for selecting the students who will be offered a spot in the program. There is a variety of selection processes used by the mini schools, but there is evidence that some students may be less successful in choosing a program than others because of the criteria used by the schools. The only students who are truly free to practice school choice are those who may be offered a spot in more than one alternative program and must then choose the one they prefer to attend. Because all of these programs are over-subscribed, even those schools that have expanded to accommodate more students cannot be chosen freely. This is a concern with any system of choice in which the demand exceeds the supply of spaces available and schools are permitted to select students for their program.

## *Equalizing Educational Opportunities*

The District Specified Alternative Programs for enrichment are, by definition, exclusive. They are designed to provide an enriched academic program “for students who have demonstrated significantly high potential, talent and need for a challenging program in preparation for their post-secondary education” (“Options 2003”, p. 1). Students who require extra support, whether in English as a second language or because of special learning or behavioural needs, are told they are not eligible for these enriched programs.

Requiring at least a “B” average on the previous report card may prevent gifted students who do not function well in a regular class but might thrive in the enriched environment of a mini school program from benefiting from the programs. There is a definite bias in most of the selection processes towards students who perform well on tests and in high-stakes interview or audition situations. Of the eight mini schools whose meetings I attended, only Britannia’s Venture Program offered what I considered to be a more equitable selection process that might enable students who are creative thinkers but may not show their best thinking on a piece of paper or in an interview to be successful. The process of selection at Britannia allowed students to demonstrate their strengths with much less anxiety than other selection processes. Students were given an entire day to participate in group activities and show their ability to work creatively and cooperatively. At the end of the day, even if they were not accepted into the program, these students would have had an enriched academic, rather than a potentially discouraging, experience. If mini schools are as committed as many of them claim to be about selecting a culturally diverse group of students, they should ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to show their strengths without having to compete in written assignments and interviews. Byng Arts Mini School may provide a more even playing field for those students who possess artistic ability, although there is likely a bias towards students whose families have

been able to provide private lessons in the arts. For the more academic mini schools, the selection process is unlikely to encourage less confident students to consider making an application. Point Grey, indicated that they might favour families with resources, both financial and cultural, that would prevent some students from qualifying for programs that could prove beneficial for them. Even given that these programs are designed for talented students, there are roadblocks that would be more daunting for some gifted students than for others.

In the teacher interview, Sharon from Eastling, commented that "I've had parents in the past that have basically cut the children out of [the mini school] because they felt it was too much work." The selection process alone likely prevents some parents from encouraging their children to apply to the mini school. Such self-elimination has also been noted by other researchers (Andres, 1994; Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 1989). Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) warn that "the chances of entering higher education can be seen as the product of a selection process which, throughout the school system, is applied with very unequal severity, depending of the student's social origin. In fact, for the most disadvantaged classes, it is purely and simply a matter of elimination" (p. 2). If school choices are to become more diverse and widely available, policies need to be in place to protect students from either systemic or self-elimination. Care needs to be taken to ensure that selection processes are equitable. Information needs to be distributed to ensure that some parents do not limit post-secondary opportunities for their children because they do not understand the advantages that their child may have in an enriched academic program.

### *School Choice and Achievement*

The Ministry of Education states that with school choice "it all comes down to improving student achievement – the central focus of the entire education system" ("Frequently Asked Questions", p. 2). Achievement is deliberately left as a vague concept which could be

open to a wide variety of interpretations, including attending classes regularly, feeling safe at school and obtaining high scores on standardized tests. For many students, each of the above is a significant achievement and it is good to have that acknowledged. The danger with accepting all possible interpretations of "achievement" is that it suggests that the outcome of all educational achievements is equal. Unfortunately, this is not true. As explained by Wotherspoon (1998), rightly or wrongly as a society "we tend to place the greatest social and economic value on the attainment of a university degree" (p. 162). While preparing students for university should not be the most important function of the public school system, few students will achieve a comfortable standard of living after high school without going on to some post-secondary training. Students who intend to go on to post-secondary education will be most successful if they are in a program that encourages academic achievement as well as other activities.

However, not all parents consider academic achievement to be their most important criterion when selecting a high school program. As discussed above, parents consider many criteria, including such non-academic considerations as location and maintaining a peer group, when choosing high school programs. The relative weight given to these criteria in a system offering a wide range of choices may contribute to their child's exclusion from post-secondary educational opportunities. I am not arguing that students who do not choose to apply to a mini school program will be less successful in attaining post-secondary training and finding satisfying employment. The majority of students who attend post-secondary institutions have not attended a mini school and the existing high school programs prepare a significant number of students for an impressive variety of post-secondary programs. However, if there is to be a movement towards more choice in the system, including choices that emphasize achievements that may not lead to post-secondary education (e.g. sports schools or vocational schools), information about the ramifications of choosing less-academic programs needs to be frankly presented to parents who may not otherwise take this into consideration.

### *The Role of the Grade 7 Teachers in School Choice*

One variable that appears to have had an impact on parents' choice of program on the east side of Vancouver is the approach taken by the teacher to making information about school programs available to parents. The teacher interviews revealed that there was a variety of approaches to informing parents and students of choices. At Westview, the Grade 7 teachers claimed to have been in constant touch with parents regarding educational issues. Yet the parents rated the importance of information provided by the teacher relatively low. As the teachers were well aware, these parents possessed and used a sophisticated information network when making school decisions and considered themselves to be well-informed without having to rely on their child's teacher.

At Eastling, 75% of the parents who chose the neighbourhood high school, particularly those without a high school education, indicated that their children's teachers provided most of their information about high school. The three Grade 7 teachers at Eastling indicated that they use different approaches when informing students and parents about high school programs. Tina tended to wait for the student or the parent to bring up the issue of alternative choices and only then distributed the information provided by the school board. Sharon was generally uncomfortable about the options that were currently available in Vancouver and, while she did distribute the information to students that she felt were qualified, she did not promote the mini school as providing an advantage to students. Maureen was the most proactive when distributing information to students and parents. She appeared to give the most detailed information about the process of applying to the program and how to research the programs that are available.

While teachers at Westview do not need to inform their parents how to do an internet search or call the school board for information, at Eastling there are likely parents who do not possess these skills. They may lack the resources to have access to the internet in their home or

have insufficient English skills to make the phone calls that are necessary. It is much more important, therefore, that the teachers offer more explicit instructions about where information can be found and how the application process works.

I discovered when calling to arrange parent interviews that most of the parents at Eastling who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed did not speak English fluently. In several cases I was not able to communicate with the person answering the telephone. Making information available in a variety of languages would be helpful, either by having translations made of information materials or arranging information nights where presentations are made by representatives of the various linguistic and cultural communities represented within the school. Students and parents with some experience in the mini school program, as well as the regular program, could also be made available to parents to advise them about the strengths of the program and the application procedures. Many students may not qualify for the mini school program either academically or because of insufficient fluency in English. Perhaps this, too, needs to be communicated clearly so that students and parents are not disappointed when, after going through quite a rigorous selection process, they are not accepted into the program. Either way, they should be given an equitable opportunity to investigate their options and evaluate whether or not the program is right for their children. When they had this information, a greater number of Maureen's parents tended to apply to the mini school regardless of their own level of education or linguistic ability.

It was unfortunate that none of the students from Maureen's class was admitted into the mini school. Maybe they were not strong enough academically or perhaps their English fluency was not adequate. Perhaps their parents were not well-informed about the characteristics of students for whom these programs are intended. It could be that they would not have made the application if they had understood more clearly the qualifications required for students to be accepted into the program. On the other hand, maybe these students needed more help than their

parents could offer preparing for the selection process. Learning how to write an entrance exam and how to conduct yourself in an interview are skills that can be taught. Another possibility is that the selection process at Killarney is biased towards students who come from homes where these skills are part of the cultural capital.

### *The Role of the School Board in School Choice*

There are differences in awareness and motivation among parents choosing and not choosing District Specified Alternative Programs. Some parents know where and how to gain access to information and some do not. Teachers at Eastling indicated that the school board sent only a dozen brochures about the District Specified Alternative Programs to a school with a population of over eighty Grade 7 students. No doubt these brochures are expensive to print and are distributed to schools according to the number of students who are expected to apply to the mini schools. However, this sparse distribution of resources makes it more likely that the parents who receive the brochure will be those who know to ask for it or to whom the teachers choose to distribute the information. While the full brochure does not, perhaps, need to be distributed to all parents in the school, it would be more equitable if a fact sheet outlining the programs that are available and how to obtain more information if parents are interested could be handed out to all parents, with translations made if necessary.

Providing parents with internet access at the school, and assistance in learning how to use it, would also help to ensure that they had more equitable access to such information as FSA scores and other criteria that seem to be valuable to parents who choose alternative programs. This access need not be provided by school board personnel if there are parents or community volunteers who are familiar with the system.

Meetings at the high school were most useful to parents who chose alternative programs. Perhaps other parents did not attend these meetings because they did not have the English skills

to understand the information being given. It might be advisable for the Vancouver School Board to provide translators at meetings in high schools with a large immigrant population. Organizing alternate meetings in applicable languages, with liaisons who understand the issues in different cultural communities could also ensure that all parents have an equitable opportunity to make an informed choice among the options that the high school has to offer.

A review of the data collected over the course of this study indicates that, although the Vancouver School Board has made an effort to ensure that the District Specified Alternative Programs are distributed throughout the district, some concerns still remain about the equity of access to these programs. While based on a small sample of parents in Vancouver, this study indicates that District Specified Alternative Programs attract a disproportionate number of parents who have higher levels of education, particularly on the east side, and more prestigious occupations. Furthermore, there are more spaces to accommodate children who apply to programs on the west side. An examination of the sources of information used and the criteria considered by parents choosing mini schools and parents choosing neighbourhood schools indicates that parents with less education may require more assistance on the part of the school and the school board to ensure that they are provided with the information to make an informed choice among the schools. When they are provided with this information, as they were in Maureen's class, they tend to be more apt to apply to the mini school. This discrepancy in terms of educational level is not as pronounced on the west side of the city, although alternative programs seem to be slightly more popular among parents with more prestigious occupations.

On both sides of the city, parents have indicated that they are more concerned about the quality of teaching in their school and the safety of their children than having a variety of specialized programs from which to choose. The child's happiness and well-being are overwhelmingly the concern among all parents, indicating that they will be likely to choose a nearby school that is attended by their child's friends before they will consider sending their



child to an educational program outside of their neighbourhood. This brings into question the wisdom of pursuing educational policies that force school boards, already struggling to maintain existing programs, to create a network of alternative programs of choice. It may be a more just policy to attempt to offer some of the activities available to mini school students to those in regular programs so that a greater number of students can benefit from enriched opportunities.

Although there is some disparity between parents choosing District Specified Alternative Programs and parents choosing the neighbourhood high school, in terms of level of education and prestige of occupation, there are many areas of agreement as well. A few families indicated that they were opting out of the public school system or crossing boundaries to send their children to high school programs elsewhere in Vancouver. However, the majority of families in this study were electing to have their children remain in their school catchment area, either in the local mini school or in the regular program. Clearly, among the parents in this study, there is little interest in moving children around the city, no matter how desirable other schools or programs might be. The parents' concerns with personal safety may well be a part of their desire to keep their children in the neighbourhood. Presumably, these parents are content with the safety of their own neighbourhood and prefer to keep their children close to home. I wonder if this would be as true in a school where there may be concerns about safety. One mother indicated that she was applying to a variety of mini school programs as a means of trying to prevent her daughter from having to attend one of the east-side high schools in Vancouver. Another study might consider this dynamic, particularly along the corridor dividing the east and west sides of the city. Parents at these two schools, on the far east and west edges of the district did not seem to be using the mini schools as a ticket out of their neighbourhood school.

Such a strong preference for the neighbourhood school programs makes me wonder about the wisdom of the Ministry of Education's continuing to encourage the creation of a magnet school system. Particularly in times of fiscal restraint, there appears to be little appetite for

creating specialized programs scattered around the city. Vancouver's model of placing many similar specialized programs throughout the district may be a more equitable model, providing resources are shared fairly among the programs created and parents are not required to provide an unreasonable share of the program funding.

Perhaps if parents were encouraged to be part of the planning and creation of such programs, they would be less likely to feel that they do not have enough choice in the education of their children. Whitty et al. (1998) believe that "we now need to experiment with and evaluate new forms of association in the public sphere within which citizen rights in education policy... can be reasserted against trends towards both a restricted and authoritarian version of the state and a marketized civil society" (p. 134). With School Planning Councils and Parent Advisory Committees already in place, perhaps these bodies could make recommendations concerning new programs that meet the needs and interests of students and parents within the school community. For example, computer technology might be of interest to parents at Killarney. However, policies must be put in place to ensure that all parents are given a voice in creation of new programs. Furthermore, no new programs are likely to be created while the funding for current programs remains inadequate. Existing programs have been so severely affected over the past year that there is little likelihood of new materials and facilities to house specialized programs being available in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, one question that remains is how to ensure that the programs that do exist are made more equitable in terms of information and access. If the Vancouver School Board is, indeed committed to ensuring that these programs are equitably accessible to all students in the district, there are several considerations that should be addressed.

First of all, information needs to be provided to all parents in the district in a manner that is understandable to them. The benefits of the program should be clearly stated, as well as the expectations that will be made of the students that enter the program, so that parents can make an

educated evaluation of whether or not a mini school program is suitable for their child. This study suggests that parents from more working-class backgrounds require more information about the programs and the application process as well. Parents also need to understand the implications of what participating in such an enriched program would have for their child in terms of homework, commitment to cooperative problem solving, and involvement in extended projects and field trip experiences. These programs would not suit all children, but the choice to apply or not should be made after careful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages, not because some students and their parents are better informed than others. Working-class may also need more encouragements to apply to these programs, in order to avoid their self-elimination from educational opportunities. The fact that parents at Westview were as likely to choose the neighbourhood high school as the mini school program, even though they felt well-informed about their choices, indicates that there might not be a dramatic increase in applications if information were more widely disseminated.

Since the teachers are the closest school representatives to the parent community, distributing and interpreting the information should begin with them. Then there should be equitable access to other resources, on the internet or through high school contacts, so that parents can take the initiative to become informed about the programs that are available.

The selection process needs to be designed so that students who do not function well on paper and pencil tests or interviews have an opportunity to demonstrate their academic strengths. The programs do not seem to be designed to teach students to write tests. On the contrary, most of the programs stressed that their focus is on creative problem solving and enriching the curriculum through outdoor challenge activities. I believe that the selection process should more closely match the activities which will be encountered in the program.

If information were more equitably available and the selection process were more student-friendly, I believe that more parents might consider these programs for their children.

The dilemma then mirrors that of the Killarney Mini School. If only thirty students can be accommodated out of the hundreds that apply, perhaps, rather than down-playing the benefits or offering social functions to appease those students not chosen, there is a need to expand the program, or at least some facets of it, so that a greater number of students could benefit from the enriched activities. The parents and teachers at the Byng Arts Mini School successfully persuaded the school board to allow them to accommodate an entire extra class of students. Britannia's Venture Program indicated that it could be expanded if there were sufficient interest. If that can be done at these programs, could it not also be done at Killarney?

If it is too difficult or expensive to expand the program to accommodate an entire cohort, perhaps some of the features of the mini school programs could be made more widely available to all students attending high school. The extended field trips could be more widely offered, if they are considered to be so educationally beneficial. Of course, funding would have to be found to enable a wider socioeconomic range of students to participate. Many of the mini school programs stress the sense of community engendered by small cohort as a benefit. This aspect of the mini school could be more widely available through timetabling groups of students in classes together and organizing community-building activities. Combining English and Social Studies in a Humanities program, very similar to how these subjects are taught in elementary school and some secondary and middle schools, is also a feature of the mini schools that could easily be made available to a wider group of students.

With a creative use of resources, perhaps some aspects of the mini school programs could be made more widely available to other students in the school. I recognize that restructuring to provide extra programs is difficult at this time, when schools are already reeling from the effects they are experiencing due to cuts that have been made to other programs. If the Ministry of Education is truly committed to enabling school districts to provide expanded programs of school choice, it needs to be prepared to fund these initiatives adequately.

### *Final thoughts*

The District Specified Alternative Programs were designed to serve a perceived need in the public school system; namely, providing the enriched educational opportunities required to enable the most academically capable students to achieve their full potential. As support was provided for students learning English as a second language and students requiring a variety of learning supports, so was it deemed necessary to nurture gifted and talented students. In times where resources were more adequate, providing a variety of different programs to suit the varying needs of students in the district was accepted as the role of the public school. Although the ideal of meeting the needs of all students in the system has not changed, the means of delivering these programs are being examined more closely than ever. As school districts struggle to balance budgets by increasing class sizes and cutting support workers, it is inevitable that sooner or later the public will begin to question programs that are designed to meet the needs of a few students. If these same programs prove to be benefiting a minority of socially advantaged students, it is unlikely that they will survive the cutbacks that threaten all such exclusive programs.

This study involved a small percentage of the four to five thousand students in Vancouver who will move from elementary school into high school this fall. Although I attempted to sample a cross-section of families, I do not presume to suggest that the results I found fully represent the whole population. However, the pattern I observed of alternative educational choices attracting parents with higher levels of education and more prestigious occupations has been replicated in many other studies. It seems reasonable to suggest that before exploring the possibility of creating more choices in public education careful thought needs to go into creating policies that will ensure that enriched academic programs will be advertised and provided equitably for the benefit of all students.

## References

- Ambler, John. (1994). Who benefits from educational choice? Some evidence from Europe. In , Elchanan Cohn (Ed), *Market approaches to education*. Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd., 353 - 375.
- Andres Bellamy, L. (1994). Capital, habitus, field, and practice: An introduction to the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In L Erwin & D. MacLennan (Eds.), *Sociology of education in Canada* (pp. 120 – 135). Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd.
- Archbald, Doug. (1996). SES and demographic predictions of magnet school enrollment. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 29, 152 - 161.
- Ball, Stephen J. , R. Bowe, & S. Gewirtz (1995). Circuits of schooling: a sociological exploration of parental choice of school in social-class contexts. In A.H. Halsey, H.Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Ed), *Education: culture, economy, society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 409 - 421.
- BCPVA: Advocates for public education. Retrieved April 22, 2003 from the BC Principals' & Vice Principals' Association Web Site: <http://www.bcpvpa.bc.ca/advocacy.html>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1986). The forms of capital. In A.H. Halsey, H.Lauder, P. Brown, A.S. Wells (Ed). *Education: culture, economy, society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 46 - 58.
- Bourdieu, P. and J. Passeron. (1979). *The inheritors*, trans. R. Nice. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Original work published in 1966).
- Britannia Venture Program. Retrieved on December 27, 2002 from the Vancouver School Board Web Site: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/apfe/bvp.htm>
- Byng Arts Mini School. Retrieved on December 27, 2002 from the Vancouver School Board Web Site: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/apfe/bams.htm>
- Chubb, John E. & T. M. Moe (1988). Politics, markets, and the organization of schools. In A. H. Halsey, H.Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Ed), *Education: culture, economy, society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 363 - 381.
- Coons, J.E. & Sugarman, S.D. (EDS.). (1978). *Education by choice: the case for family control*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Davis, Gary A. & S. B. Rimm. (1994). *Education of the gifted and talented*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Educational Choice. Retrieved October 7, 2002 from the Alberta Teachers' Association Web Site:[http://www.teachers.ab.ca/peac/peac\\_pamphlets/Eductional\\_Chice](http://www.teachers.ab.ca/peac/peac_pamphlets/Eductional_Chice).

- Frequently asked questions about our guiding principles for education: choice. Retrieved April 27, 2003 from the B.C. Ministry of Education – Media Room Web Site:  
<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/news/faqs/choicefaq.html>.
- Gaskell, Jane. (2001). School choice and educational leadership: rethinking the future of public schooling. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Ed.), *Second International Handbook of educational leadership and administration*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2 - 80.
- Greene, Jay P. (1998). Civic values in public and private schools. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Ed.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 83 - 106.
- Hassel, Bryan C. (1998). The case for charter schools. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Ed.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 33 - 54.
- Henig, Jeffrey R. (1999). School choice outcomes. In S. D. Sugarman & F. R. Kemerer (Ed.), *School choice and social controversy*. Washington: Brookings Institutional Press, 68 - 107.
- Hepburn, Claudia R. (1999). The case for school choice: models from the United States, New Zealand, Denmark, and Sweden. Retrieved July 13, 2003 from <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/shared/readmore.asp?sNav=pb&id=215>
- Hoxby, Carolyn, M. (1998). Analyzing school choice Reforms that use America's traditional forms of parental choice. In P. Peterson & B. Hassel (Ed.), *Learning from school choice*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 133 - 156.
- Lareau, Annette. (1989). *Home advantage: social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. New York The Falmer Press.
- Lauder, Hugh & D. Hughes. (1999). *Trading in futures: why markets in education don't work*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Levin, Henry M. (2000). A comprehensive framework for evaluating educational vouchers. Occasional Paper 5. National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Metz, Mary Haywood. (1986). *Different by design: the context and character of three magnet schools*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Opportunities for choice in education. Retrieved March 23, 2003 , from the Government of Alberta Web Site: <http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/educationsystem/ourstudentsIV.asp>.
- Options 2003: Information for students entering secondary school. Retrieved July 14, 2003, from the Vancouver School Board Website: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/NR/rdonlyres/2F6DD133-3F95-4178-A4CE-9A984B0A7BE5/995/VSBOptions02.pdf>

- Petch A. (1986). Parents' reasons for choosing secondary schools. In Stillman, A (Ed.), *The balancing act of 1980: parents, politics and education*. Windsor: NFER/Nelson.
- Pineo, P.C. (1985). Revisions of the Pineo-Porter-McRoberts socioeconomic classification of occupations for the 1981 census. Hamilton: McMaster University, Program for Quantitative Studies in Economics and Population Research Paper no. 125.
- Prince of Wales Mini School. Retrieved on December 27, 2002 from the Vancouver School Board Web Site: <http://www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/apfe/dlprincewales.htm>
- Programs of Choice. Retrieved November 7, 2002 from the Edmonton Public Schools Web Site: <http://districtsite.epsb.edmonton.ab.ca/faq.cfm>.
- School Choice. Retrieved March 7, 2002 from the B.C. Teachers' Federation Web Site: [http://www.bctf.ca/Parents/IssuesInEducation/Support/School\\_Choice.html](http://www.bctf.ca/Parents/IssuesInEducation/Support/School_Choice.html).
- School District #35 (Langley): Alternate programs or schools. Retrieved April 27, 2003 from the British Columbia School Trustees Association Web Site: <http://www.bcsta.org/policy/Polindex.html>.
- School District #36 (Surrey): District and community-initiated programs :Programs of Choice. Retrieved April 27, 2003 from the British Columbia School Trustees Association Web Site: <http://www.bcsta.org/policy/Polindex.html>.
- School District #40 (New Westminster): Programs of choice. Retrieved April 27, 2003 from the British Columbia School Trustees Association Web Site: <http://www.bcsta.org/policy/Polindex.html>.
- Schwartz, Lita Linzer. (1994). *Why give "gifts" to the Gifted? Investing in a national resource*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Corwin Press.
- Steffenhagen, Janet (2001, September 27). B.C. schools must be consumer-driven, minister says. *The Vancouver Sun*, p. A1 – A2.
- Steffenhagen, Janet (2001, September 28). Choice in schools: It won't be easy, administrators say. *The Vancouver Sun*, p. B1 – B2.
- Steffenhagen, Janet. (2003, April 21). Students may attend any B.C. school; it's the first years students have had this right. *The Vancouver Sun*, pp. B1, B5.
- Steffenhagen, Janet (2003, May 2). Balabanov to resign as leader of parent advisory councils. *The Vancouver Sun*, p. A2.
- Sugarman, S.D. & Kemerer, F.R. (Eds.). (1999). *School choice and social controversy: politics, policy, and law*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Ungerleider, Charles. (2003). *Failing our kids: how we are ruining our public schools*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd.



- Walford, Geoffrey. (1994). Choice and equity in education. London: Cassell.
- Waslander, Sietske & M. Thrupp (1995). Choice, competition, and segregation: an empirical analysis of a New Zealand secondary school market, 1990-93. In A.H. Halsey, H.Lauder, P. Brown, & A. S. Wells (Ed), Education: culture, economy, society. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 439 - 459.
- Whitty, Geoffrey, S. Power & D. Halpin. (1998). Devolution and choice in education: the school, the state, and the market. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Willms, J. Douglas & F. Echols. (1997). Alert and inert clients: the Scottish experience of parental choice of schools. In Elchanan Cohn (Ed), Market approaches to education. Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd., 425 - 441.
- Witte, John. (2000). The Market approach to education. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Wotherspoon, Terry. (1998). The sociology of education in Canada. Oxford: University Press Canada.

## Appendix D – Questions Used in Teacher Interviews

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_

### SECTION A - Getting to Know You:

1. For how many years have you been teaching?
2. At what schools have you taught?
3. For how many years have you taught at this school?
4. For how many years have you taught Grade 7?
5. Have you ever taught Grade 7 at another school?
6. Do you have any children?
7. How old are they?
8. What schools do they attend?

### SECTION B - \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School Community:

1. For what high school(s) is \_\_\_\_\_ a feeder school?
2. Do most students tend to go to [the neighbourhood school]?
3. What other programs seem most popular?
4. Why do you think these are popular?
5. How are students and parents informed about: a) programs at high school?  
b) other programs?
6. Does the local high school offer enriched and remedial courses?
7. Do you inform parents about these courses?
8. Do you inform all parents about the choices available or only those for whom it seems to be relevant?

Appendix D (continued)

SECTION C - \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School's Parents:

1. Would you describe parents at this school as very involved in their children's school program in elementary school?
  2. In what ways are they involved?
  3. Do they tend to seek enrichment for gifted and talented children?
  4. What kinds of programs do they ask for?
  5. Do they tend to try to modify programs for children with learning difficulties?
  6. What kinds of support do they ask for?
  7. Do they ask many questions of you about high school programs?
  8. What kinds of information do they want from you?
  9. If you cannot answer any questions, to whom do you refer them?
  10. What other sources of information do you think parents use when looking at high school programs?
    - a) internet?
    - b) School board publications?
    - c) Meetings at the elementary school?
    - d) Meetings at Lord Byng?
    - e) Meetings at mini schools?
    - f) Other parents?
    - g) Other students?
    - h) Family?
    - i) Business associates?
    - j) Other?
  11. Is there anything else that I should know about high school choice at this school?
- 
-

## SECTION A – HIGH SCHOOL CHOICES

1. Which high school(s) you are considering for your child next year? Please write your answer(s) below:

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Please indicate if your child has applied to any of the following programs:

Britannia Venture Program.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Byng Arts Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
David Thompson Odyssey Program.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gladstone Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Hamber Challenge Program.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ideal Mini School – Churchill.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
John Oliver Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Killarney Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Point Grey Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prince of Wales Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Templeton Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tupper Mini School.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vancouver Technical Summit Program.....	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>

## SECTION B – SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Please check one for each line.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. My child's teacher provided most of my information about high schools.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Meetings at the elementary school gave us a lot of high school information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Information from high school teachers and counselors was very helpful.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Information nights at the high school affected our choice of schools.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Information meetings at the mini schools influenced our decision.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The internet was a valuable source of information about programs.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Brochures from the school board gave us a lot of useful information.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Advice from parents at our elementary school helped make our decision.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Parents of high school students have influenced our choice of schools.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. High school students have offered valuable advice about programs.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. My child's opinion was very important when making our decision.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Family friends have had an influence on our choice of high schools.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Advice of other family members was important in our decision-making.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Business associates and co-workers have helped us choose a school.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Please indicate below any other sources of information which helped you learn about high school programs:_____				

## SECTION C – CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM

Please rate how important you feel each of the following is when you are considering a high school program that best suits the needs and interests of your son or daughter. Check one for each line.

	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1. The school's academic program.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Fine Arts courses (e.g. Music, Visual Art, Drama).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. The school's athletic program (e.g. Physical Education.).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The school's athletic teams.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. The vocational/technical program (e.g. Clothing /Auto Shop).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. The school's use of advanced computer technology.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Extra-curricular activities (e.g. social clubs; intramural teams).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Enriched learning opportunities.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Access to Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate Programs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Availability of learning assistance teachers.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Availability of extra academic support.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Availability of instruction in English as a Second Language.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Service opportunities (e.g. charitable fund raising).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Leadership opportunities (e.g. Students' Council executive).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Involvement in academic competitions (e.g. Pascal).....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Extended field trip experiences.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. The quality of teaching.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Class size .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. The school's reputation for academic excellence .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Academic honours and achievements of students at the school.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. University scholarships awarded to students at the school .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. The Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) results of students .....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. The Fraser Institute's rating of the school.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. The school's reputation for personal safety.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Concerns about bullying.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- |   | Not at all<br>Important  | Somewhat<br>Important    | Very<br>Important        | Extremely<br>Important   |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 26. Concerns about drugs and alcohol.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 27. Keeping my child with school friends.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 28. Keeping my child with brothers and sisters.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 29. The location of the school.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 30. Ease of travel to the school for my child.....  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 31. The physical appearance of the high school.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 32. Special facilities (e.g. pool, theatre).....  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 33. Finding a school that teaches values similar to my own.....   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 34. A culturally diverse school community.....  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 35. Please indicate in the space below any other considerations that make a difference when you are deciding which high school you prefer your son or daughter to attend. |                          |                          |                          |                          |

---



---



---

### SECTION D – FAMILY INFORMATION

1. Please mark the box below that describes your relationship to the child:

mother.....☐  
 father.....☐  
 guardian.....☐  
 other.....☐

(please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

2. Did you attend high school in Vancouver? Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, please name the high school(s) you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

If you attended high school elsewhere in Canada, in what city and province? \_\_\_\_\_

If you attended high school outside of Canada, in what country? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What was the highest level of education you completed?

Elementary school.....☐  
 Secondary school diploma.....☐  
 Apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school.....☐  
 Community college diploma/certificate.....☐  
 Completed Bachelors Degree.....☐  
 Completed Graduate or Professional Degree (e.g. medicine, law, engineering).....☐

4. What is your usual occupation (e.g. high school Math teacher, sales clerk, homemaker)?

5. For what kind of business or industry do you work (e.g. private girls' school, retail shoe store, sawmill, provincial government agency)?

6. What language is usually spoken in the home?

**IF APPLICABLE, PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS**

1. Did your spouse or partner attend high school in Vancouver? Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, please name the high school(s) he or she attended? \_\_\_\_\_

If he or she attended high school elsewhere in Canada, in what city and province? \_\_\_\_\_

If he or she attended high school outside of Canada, in what country? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What was the highest level of education completed by your spouse or partner?

Elementary school..... ☐

Secondary school diploma..... ☐

Apprenticeship, vocational, or trade school..... ☐

Community college diploma/certificate..... ☐

Completed Bachelors Degree..... ☐

Completed Graduate or Professional Degree (e.g. medicine, law, engineering)..... ☐

3. What is your spouse or partner's usual occupation (e.g. high school Math teacher, sales clerk, homemaker)?

4. For what kind of business or industry does your spouse or partner work (e.g. private girls' school, retail shoe store, sawmill, provincial government agency)?

If you have any final comments that you would like to share with me regarding the high school choices you are making for your son or daughter or high school choices currently available in Vancouver, please add them below.

Thank you very much for taking the time to fill in this questionnaire. Please return the completed questionnaire, in the envelope provided, to your child's teacher as soon as possible.