

A Story of Equity and School Choice Policies: The Need for Caution.  
A Two-Decade Case Study of a Suburban/Rural School Division in Alberta, Canada

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In

Educational Admin and Leadership

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**Abstract**

This 20-year case study is an engagement with the complexities of school choice policies and its effects on equity within one suburban rural public school division. The case study examined policy evolutions in the school division from January 1995 to December 2014 using both extensive document analyses (inclusive of school board minutes and highlights, school division plans and results reports, and policy documents) and semi-structured interviews with 29 participants who held various leadership positions (inclusive of elected school trustees, superintendents, principals, and other school division leaders) as the primary data sources. The study employed a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework to demonstrate how the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) evolved from a school division with an enabling policy environment that encouraged, promoted, and celebrated choice to a school system with a more prescriptive policy approach that actively discouraged school choice. In terms of equity, the findings demonstrate that the school division became a more inequitable school system in terms of individual access over the course of the case study and that matters of equity were reduced to economic considerations judged at the school level. Evidence from the case clearly reveal cautions are needed when considering policy directions that are influenced by market principles. From a leadership perspective, the study demonstrates how metaphors are employed by agents to navigate various policy directions, construct the “rules” of the game, and influence both policy enactment and outcomes. The findings are significant for educational leaders committed to an equity-led policy approach as they offer valuable lessons in terms of planning and playing the policy enactment game. The

study concludes by offering suggestions for a way forward from an equity-led policy perspective using a CAS framework.

**Preface**

This thesis is an original work by Marianne Barrett. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “School Choice in an Alberta School Division: An eighteen year retrospective”, No. Pro00040339, 17/10//2013. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my family and colleagues who supported me throughout this journey. First, a special thanks to my mother and family who instilled in me both a passion for learning and a recognition of the need for grit and determination. Secondly, this work would not have been possible without the support of many mentors. Although too numerous to name, I thank each of them for recognizing, supporting, and stretching leadership from the heart combining authenticity, intelligence, and warmth. A final dedication to the friendship, mentorship, and memory of Stuart Adams. Stuart influenced and continues to influence all who had the great honour to know and work with him.

### **Acknowledgements**

Dr. Alison Taylor has been an exceptional thesis supervisor. Her sage advice, thoughtful and constructive feedback, and patient encouragement aided all aspects of this thesis. I would also like to thank all members of my supervisory and examining committees, and specifically Dr. Brenda Spencer, for their support of this project. Finally, a thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council whose financial support of policy analyses provides an opportunity for practitioners to fully engage in a complex research project.

**Table of Contents**

Chapter One ..... 1  
 The Broad Context: Inequity as a Complex Social Problem ..... 2  
 Public Policies and Equity ..... 5  
 School Choice Policies and Equity ..... 8  
 Complex Adaptive Systems: A Conceptual Framework ..... 11  
 Complexity and a Case Study Methodology ..... 12  
 Complexity and Insider Status ..... 14  
 Overview of the Dissertation ..... 19

Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework ..... 23  
 Complex Adaptive Systems: An Overview ..... 25  
 Complex Adaptive Systems are Open Systems with Fuzzy Boundaries ..... 30  
 Complex Adaptive Systems have Distributed versus Centralized Hierarchical Control  
 ..... 32  
 Complex Adaptive Systems are Networks of Interconnected Agents ..... 34  
 Complex Adaptive Systems have Cyclical Feedback Mechanisms ..... 38  
 Complex Adaptive Systems have Emergent Properties ..... 39  
 Summary ..... 40

Chapter Three: Literature Review ..... 41  
 Section One: Broader Policy Context ..... 41  
     Global trends. .... 41  
     The Alberta context. .... 45  
 Section Two: A Review of School Choice Research ..... 51  
     What is school choice? ..... 51  
     Covert and overt choice. .... 52  
     Political considerations. .... 53  
     Structure of choice. .... 54  
     Choice structures. .... 55  
     School choice outcomes. .... 56  
         School choice outcomes: Students. .... 57  
         School choice outcomes: Schools. .... 58  
         School choice outcomes: Society. .... 60

Chapter Four: Methodology ..... 64  
 The Case: The Study Site ..... 66  
 Sources of Evidence ..... 67  
     Document analysis ..... 67  
     Semi-structured interviews. .... 70  
 Participants ..... 71  
 Case Study Protocol ..... 73  
 Procedure ..... 74  
 Data Analysis: A Staged Approach ..... 76  
     Stage one. .... 76

## A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Stage two. ....  | 77  |
| Stage three. ....  | 78  |
| Stage four. ....   | 79  |
| Assumptions, Strengths, and Limitations. ....                                    | 82  |
| Chapter Five: Narratives of Choice by Phase .....                                | 85  |
| Section One: Overview of the Local Context of the Suburban Rural School Division |     |
| Case .....   | 86  |
| Demographic information. ....  | 86  |
| Leadership in the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). ....              | 90  |
| Section Two: Phase 1 (September 1995 to December 2000) .....                     | 92  |
| Year one context. ....   | 92  |
| Strategic education plans. ....  | 97  |
| The reduction of choice: School closures. ....                                   | 98  |
| The expansion of choice opportunities. ....                                      | 102 |
| Charter schools. ....  | 102 |
| MUN charter school. ....   | 107 |
| Other charter school proposals. ....   | 108 |
| Alternative programs. ....   | 108 |
| Logos alternative program. ....  | 109 |
| MUN alternative program proposal. ....   | 111 |
| Private schools becoming alternative programs in the public system. ....         | 112 |
| French immersion. ....   | 120 |
| System and school-based programs of choice. ....                                 | 123 |
| Attendance areas and boundary exemptions. ....                                   | 129 |
| Academy of International Services. ....  | 132 |
| Marketing and the promotion of schools. ....                                     | 134 |
| Student transportation. ....   | 135 |
| Summary: Phase 1. ....   | 137 |
| Section Three: Phase 2 (January 2001 to December 2005) .....                     | 142 |
| Year one context. ....   | 142 |
| Strategic education plans. ....  | 145 |
| The reduction of choice: School closures. ....                                   | 147 |
| The expansion of choice opportunities. ....                                      | 153 |
| Charter schools. ....  | 153 |
| Alternative programs. ....   | 153 |
| French immersion. ....   | 155 |
| The Academy of International Services. ....                                      | 157 |
| System and school-based programs of choice. ....                                 | 159 |
| Policy clarification. ....   | 160 |
| School based programming. ....   | 162 |
| Attendance areas and boundary exemptions. ....                                   | 164 |
| Marketing and the promotion of schools. ....                                     | 166 |
| Student transportation. ....   | 171 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Summary: Phase 2 .....  | 172 |
| Section Four: Phase 3 (January 2006 to November 2009).....          | 176 |
| Year one context.....   | 176 |
| Strategic education plans.....                                      | 178 |
| The reduction of choice: School closures.....                       | 179 |
| The expansion of choice opportunities.....                          | 179 |
| Charter schools.....  | 179 |
| Alternative programs.....   | 180 |
| French immersion.....   | 181 |
| System and school-based programs of choice.....                     | 181 |
| Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.....                       | 183 |
| Marketing and the promotion of schools.....                         | 184 |
| Student transportation.....   | 184 |
| Summary: Phase 3.....   | 186 |
| Section Five: Phase 4 (December 2009 to December 2014).....         | 187 |
| Year one context.....   | 187 |
| Strategic education plans.....                                      | 189 |
| Funding allocations.....  | 191 |
| The reduction of choice: School closures.....                       | 194 |
| The expansion of choice opportunities.....                          | 194 |
| Charter schools.....  | 194 |
| Alternative programs.....   | 194 |
| French immersion.....   | 195 |
| System and school-based programs of choice.....                     | 196 |
| Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.....                       | 197 |
| Boundary exemption process (2010–2011).....                         | 197 |
| Boundary exemption process (2011–2012, 2012–2013).....              | 200 |
| Boundary exemption process (2013–2014 to present).....              | 210 |
| Marketing and school promotion.....                                 | 216 |
| Student transportation.....   | 217 |
| Summary: Phase 4.....   | 218 |
| Section Six: Overall Summary of the Phases.....                     | 221 |
| Chapter Six: Analysis & Discussion.....                             | 225 |
| Overview.....   | 225 |
| The Influence of a Market View of Society.....                      | 226 |
| The Construction of Social Obligations within the Organization..... | 239 |
| The Challenge of Site-Based Leadership.....                         | 245 |
| Policy Enactment as a Game with Adaptive Responses.....             | 251 |
| System effects: Programming impacts.....                            | 255 |
| Alternative Christian programming.....                              | 256 |
| Programming to attract highly motivated students and families.....  | 257 |
| Skepticism about the quality of programming.....                    | 258 |
| Playing the game: Principals and student selection.....             | 260 |

## A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Playing the game: Marketing and school promotion.....                          | 266 |
| Playing the game: Parents as strategic agents in the game.....                 | 269 |
| Playing the game: Groups of parents as strategic agents shaping the game. .... | 275 |
| Playing the game: The Board of Trustees .....                                  | 278 |
| Inequity as an Emergent Property .....   | 284 |
| Equitable access.....  | 285 |
| Equity among schools.....  | 295 |
| Chapter Seven: Conclusions .....   | 302 |
| School Divisions as Complex Adaptive Systems .....                             | 303 |
| Policy within a Complex Adaptive System.....                                   | 307 |
| Moving Forward: Policy in a Complex Adaptive System .....                      | 312 |
| Complexity and equity: Structuring the game.....                               | 313 |
| Complexity and equity: Playing the game.....                                   | 318 |
| Implications .....   | 322 |
| Educational leadership.....  | 322 |
| The Board of Trustees. ....  | 324 |
| Practice and research. ....  | 327 |
| Final Thoughts.....  | 329 |
| Personal reflection.....   | 331 |
| References.....  | 334 |
| Appendix A List of Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) Documents.....  | 366 |
| Appendix B A comparison of family income among schools in SRSDC - 2011 .....   | 369 |
| Appendix C A comparison of family income among schools in SRSDC .....          | 372 |
| Appendix D A comparison of achievement levels among schools in SRSDC (2014)... | 375 |
| Appendix E Sample Interview Questions .....                                    | 378 |

**List of Tables**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Table 1 <i>Participant Interview Summary</i> .....                                   | 72  |
| Table 2 <i>Complex Adaptive Systems Analytic Codes</i> .....                         | 77  |
| Table 3 <i>Equity and Policy Characteristics</i> .....                               | 78  |
| Table 4 <i>System and School Based Programs of Choice Expansion in Phase 1</i> ..... | 123 |
| Table 5 <i>System and School-Based Program Choice Expansion in Phase 2</i> .....     | 162 |
| Table 6 <i>Phase 3: Average Enrolment in Non-Designated Schools in Phase 3</i> ..... | 183 |
| Table 7 <i>Phase 3: Student Transportation Fees in Phase 3</i> .....                 | 185 |
| Table 8 <i>Phase 4: Enrolment at Non-Designated Schools in Phase 4</i> .....         | 216 |
| Table 9 <i>Phase 4: Student Transportation Fees in Phase 4</i> .....                 | 218 |

## Chapter One

Policy matters in the lived realities of students! Policies, and in particular school choice policies, are constructs that are contested, debated, and locally constituted. My research demonstrates the complexity and the interconnectedness among school choice policies, equity, and leadership through an in-depth 20-year case study of school choice approaches in one public school division in the province of Alberta. This dissertation documents and analyses the journey of one educational organization through political, economic, and socially tumultuous times. This case study contributes to scholarship in documenting the long term implications of the unprecedented educational reforms that were introduced in Alberta in the mid 1990s. Specifically, my research examines how a newly formed regional school division navigated the introduction and promotion of school choice, as well significant changes to education funding and to the role of principals and parents. Furthermore, this study is novel in three ways: it uses a framework of complex adaptive systems to analyze policy in an educational organization, and this approach has recently been advocated as a valuable tool for educational policy analysis (Snyder, 2013; van der Steen, van Twist, Fenger, & Le Cointre, 2013); it offers a unique lens, as I was an employee of the organization and thus have insider status in relationship to the complexity of the organization; and the length of the policy retrospective is unique and valuable as it illuminates policy evolution over time. The findings have implications for policy makers and educational leaders in relation to the equity of educational opportunities and outcomes. My research is a cautionary story but demonstrates the need to let go of linear, structural, reductionist approaches to policy-

making and embrace the political dimension and the complexity of agents, organizations, and the work of educational leaders.

My research has three broad primary questions:

- How and why did school choice policy emerge and evolve in the school division over time?
- How did school choice policies impact equity at the local level?
- How may a Complex Adaptive Systems conceptual framework assist in understanding the policy process and inform future practice?

### **The Broad Context: Inequity as a Complex Social Problem**

Educational systems around the world have been subject to a range of policy reforms over the last 2 decades with aims to improve educational quality, equity, and efficiency. Although my research examines school choice policies, it also focuses on the implications of how equity manifests at the local level in relation to school choice. As an education professional with 20 years of experience, I would suggest that the constants in my field are change and inequity. Inequities persist despite ongoing claims that education and social equity have a long association within the liberal democratic tradition. A firmly entrenched ideal of Canadian public schools is the notion that education should not be rationed on the basis of wealth but rather every child should have a chance to develop his or her capabilities through schooling (Henley & Young, 2008); however, educational inequity remains one of the most robust and persistent problems facing education (Luke, Green, & Kelly, 2010).

Educational inequity can be viewed in terms of access, outcomes, and relations.

Equity can include whether there are differential capacities to access programs or support (e.g., academically rigorous programs, literacy support, music programs, and career and technology studies). Equity can be viewed in terms of outcomes (e.g., literacy and numeracy skills, high school completion, and transition to post-secondary). Equity can also be described relationally in terms of organizational processes and relationships.

Despite the contested nature of what constitutes equity in education, one benefit of the voracious desire to facilitate local, national, and international comparisons in the education field is that data consistently reveal concentrations of inequities in terms of educational achievement and broader social outcomes (Blackmore, 2006). Inequity is a persistent and complex social challenge that to date has not been adequately addressed by educational reform. It is a premise of my research that improvements in equitable outcomes can only be achieved through foci on equitable access and equitable relations.

Although it may not be academically or politically fashionable to reference social class, I do not think it is possible to explore equity without considering the implications of class. Families navigate schooling with varying levels of social, economic, and political capital. Schools and school system leaders need to be aware of how policies and practices intersect and interact with varying degrees of capital. This perspective is supported by research in western societies. Specifically, class remains a strong predictor of academic success (Apple, 1995; Connell, 1995; Egerton & Savage, 2000).

Furthermore, Reay (2001) argues that the education systems retain remnants of elite privileges in which education continues to serve middle class interests.

Despite evidence of persistent inequities, research (and my personal experiences)

suggests that many educational practitioners are not interested in conversations about social inequities and the relationships among schools, social inequities, and different socioeconomic classes (MacBeath, 2008; Teddlie & Reynolds as cited in Willmott, 2003). There are likely many reasons for this hesitancy: the complexity and demands of the job, denial, ambivalence, internalization of individualism, liberal guilt, lack of exposure and awareness, the messiness of those types of conversations, busyness, and perhaps other reasons. However, if public education has a commitment to a moral purpose and the aims of education are to develop the capacity of the individual, balanced with the commitment to collective responsibility for one another, then there is a moral imperative to develop an understanding of the connection between education and inequity and the roles that schools play in this (Apple, 1995; Lauder, Brown, Dillabough, & Halsley, 2006). It is increasingly important that educational leaders, rather than internalizing grand narratives (MacBeath, 2008), examine how the narratives are constructed, what they mean, and how they regulate social and moral experiences (Giroux, 1982).

My research examines choice and equity within one public school division, an organization of relative economic and social privilege. In an organization where the majority of the agents and communities have relative economic and social privilege, important questions arise. How is equity constructed? Are the challenges and barriers that are experienced by families and communities who have less economic and social capital well known or understood? How do the broader policy trends and ideas intersect with the local context?

## **Public Policies and Equity**

I believe that public policies are reflections of values. As a person committed to promoting equity, public policy analysis allows for further understanding of the alignment and misalignment between the rhetoric of the intentions of public policy and the reality of policy enactment. Furthermore, policy analysis offers opportunities for strategic and collective actions to further an equity agenda.

Given the contested nature of the meaning of the word “values,” it is important to define what is meant by values relative to my research. For the purposes of this case study, values are defined as concepts that are desirable, have motivating force (Hodgkinson, 1991) and guide thought and action (Feather, 1975). Although likely not universally supported by educators, I believe striving toward equity should be both desirable and a motivating force. In other words, I believe equity should be prioritized as a value in public policy. This section outlines various approaches to equity as these definitions structured data collection and analysis throughout the research.

Equity is often identified as one of the key values in western societies. Stone (2012) states that public policies in most liberal democratic societies are structured around five key values: equity, efficiency, security, liberty, and welfare. Kearney (1990) notes there are three preeminent values in public policies: equity, choice, and efficiency. The term equity is used widely and variably in everyday conversation, in policies, and in the research and theoretical literature. In my view and experience, in practice, equity is used often used in a rhetorical manner and there is little discussion or agreement on what we actually mean by equity. Equity is often associated with what is fair and just. I

associate equity with fairness and fair is not always equal. I consistently use the term equity in this dissertation. Equity was also chosen because it is more frequently cited in the context of educational systems in Alberta generally, and in the school division case study specifically. The equity descriptors outlined below draw upon the work of researchers who look at equity through a social justice lens (Blackmore, 2006; Gewirtz, 2002; Rawls, 1999; Young, 1990, 2006).

Although it is a premise of my research that the meanings of equity are constituted, articulated, and rearticulated in local contexts, preliminary definitions provided structure to help with data collection and analysis. The simplest and broadest definition of equity specifies that it relates to who gets what, why, and how (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In other words, equity may be thought of in terms of distribution, procedures, and relations. Equity can also be assessed in terms of equitable access or equitable outcomes.

In relation to distribution, major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and fairly distribute material and non-material resources (Rawls, 1999). Fair distribution may be based on horizontal or vertical equity. Horizontal equity is classically defined and commonly understood to be the equal treatment of equals (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). One manifestation of horizontal equity is procedural equity, which relies on detailed and prescriptive procedures that often filter access to opportunities (Blackmore, 1996; Yeatman, 1990). In an environment defined by procedural equity, sameness in process constitutes what is fair and just. However, it is important to note that horizontal equity does not take account of the complexity of human

beings. In relation to students, if one recognizes the complexity of students' needs, the reality that not all students are equally situated and their varying abilities, a challenge becomes the differential treatment of unequals. Differential treatment of unequals is known as vertical equity (Berne & Stiefel, 1994). In other words, what is fair and equitable is not equal. In theory, a distribution model based on vertical equity would be one in which all schools have sufficient resources to achieve similar educational outcomes (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). In this case, some schools would need more resources than others because of their greater proportions of students with higher needs (Ladd, 2008).

Some argue that distributive equity is a weak liberal definition of what is just (Gewirtz, 2002). Critics argue that the organization of the political, economic, and social systems cannot be conceptually reduced to matters of distribution (Gewirtz, 2002) and that distribution/re-distribution is necessary but insufficient to address equity concerns. Advocates, such as Young (1990), note that a focus on re-distribution leads us to focus on what individual persons have, how much they have and the comparisons, rather than on what people are doing and how their interactions and experiences are shaped by institutional structures and how their experiences have broader impacts on their lives. A broader perspective on equity, one from a relational perspective, recognizes that the extent to which one has opportunities depends on the enabling possibilities generated by the formal and informal rules and practices of society within which we operate and by the way in which people treat each other in society (Gewirtz, 2002). Relational equity can be thought of as a family of concerns about how everyone should be treated in a society that

we believe to be good (Gewirtz, 2002). Relational equity aligns with looking at organizations from a framework of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) as these models focus on relationships, interactions, and their effects. It is my belief that an equitable system should consider equity as it relates to access, relationships, and outcomes.

My research then, looks at equity, and how it was locally constituted through school choice policies. Who gets to choose? What do they get to choose? Why did they get to choose? How do they get to choose? Finally, what are the broader implications of the local constitution of equity?

### **School Choice Policies and Equity**

This in-depth analysis of school choice policies in one local context is fundamentally an investigation about the implications of school choice on equity within a school system. In educational policies, choice, and equity are sometimes complementary, often conflicting but always present (Kearney, 1990) and they are rarely derived from a particular value position (Ozga, 1999). Policy analysis should, therefore, involve an examination of how often competing values, are brought together, organized, and configured in policies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) as the balancing of competing values is the essence of public policy (Kearney, 1990). Furthermore, school choice policies reflect values that are expressed in, and through, the means of providing education (Bridges & Jonathon, 2002). A 2-decade study of one public school jurisdiction with varying approaches to school choice provides the opportunity to study the tensions between choice and equity.

Although public policy is typically not a subject that elicits emotional responses,

school choice policy is different. School choice is an example of a hotly contested and debated policy approach in education generally, and public education specifically. Furthermore, there is general agreement that the debates around school choice are stringent, highly politicized, and subject to rhetoric (DeBray-Pelot, Lubienski, & Scott, 2007). Some may argue that the school choice debate has lessened in recent years but consider community response when school choice is limited and/or school closures are considered (Clemens, Palacios, Loyer, & Fathers, 2014). Based on my experience, school choice is an issue that often stirs highly emotional responses among students, parents, teachers, and school leaders. School choice, therefore, remains a highly relevant education policy debate.

The intellectual, personal, and emotionally laden debates are, perhaps, founded in the premise that school choice really involves questions about the proper goals of public education (McLaughlin, 2005). At a fundamental level, school choice policies are important because these policies impact children and families through the provision of educational resources and opportunities. In terms of equity, and who gets what, why, and how, the politics, policies, and practices of school choice will inform the who, the what, and the why. In a school division, does everyone have the opportunity to choose? If not, then who has that opportunity? What types of choices are available and how did those choices come to be? The who, what, and why of school choice offer opportunities to understand equity within an organization. These are important questions because school choice was introduced with a plethora of policy reforms that introduced market mechanisms, in which there was a purported shift from the government as provider to the

government as regulator whose role was to establish the conditions in which various markets were allowed to operate (Ball, 2000). Market principles assume that the exercise of choice is morally good, people are rational agents, the market is efficient, and a level of inequity is natural (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Ozga, 1999). My research looks at the long-term implications of choice and market principles on equity within an organization.

It was important for me to not limit the policy analysis to an abstract level as I have experienced the difference between abstract intentions and rhetorical claims and the reality on the ground. Secondly, I recognize the challenges of operating a school division. Similar to the claim that educational leaders can be idealistic, naïve, or uninterested in matters relating to symbolic values, it is my experience that educational policy theorists and leadership theorists seem minimally concerned about the pragmatic realities associated with the operation of a school system. Educational provision happens in the very “real” world of buildings, busing, and budgets. Educational leaders, including school board trustees, espouse and aspire to values of equity and choice but they are also confronted with the demands for efficiency in restrictive revenue contexts. In terms of equity as the who gets what, why, and how, the pragmatic considerations should not be ignored as these factors sometimes constrain and bind what is possible. A study of school choice is also then a technical study of the operation of a school system. Enrolment patterns, transportation routes, space implications, and staffing impact, and inform, school choice policies. A policy analysis that ignores the pragmatic realities is not recognizing the complexity of the lived realities of policies. Honouring both the

political and operational challenges in managing choice and equity was important to my research.

Research on school choice policies, including substantive and technical considerations, creates a policy analysis context to investigate policies, politics, leadership decision-making, pragmatic concerns, and the complex relationships among them (Ben-Porath, 2012; Bosetti, 2004). This study explores values and pragmatics, the abstract and the concrete, and their interconnections. In summary, school choice policies are implicated in the fundamental values associated with public education, and as such, are a valuable endeavour for policy analyses. My research supports dialogue and reflection with the belief that policy analyses should be pragmatic, but yet intentional and explicit about value implications. Specifically, policy analyses should consider what **can** be done so that institutional design and policy may contribute to improved equity. It is my perspective that this type of study is needed for policy development, the practice of leadership, and for navigating the future of education in politically tumultuous times. Ultimately, it is the hope that this study may provide insights, which although not generalizable, may be transferable (Anderson, 2009).

### **Complex Adaptive Systems: A Conceptual Framework**

School choice is inherently complex and it does not mean any “one thing.” School choice policies and equity are the primary foci of my research and my study examines the complexity of policies within the context of a school division. School choice policies are intertwined with underlying and explicit values, matters of leadership and governance, school finance, transportation, and parents’ goals for their children.

Embarking on a 20-year policy retrospective was a daunting endeavour. The length of the case study, the policy and personnel changes that occurred, and the amounts of the data collected, at times, seemed overwhelming. My research is, however, an engagement with the complexity and messiness of policies in an organization so it was important to avoid reductionist or simplistic explanations or generalizations. As many of the key constructs in my research are contested, a coherent theory was not used. However, Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) emerged as a credible framework to structure the dissertation, to complete the data analyses, and frame the implications of the findings. CAS provides a framework that aligns with a case study approach, engages with the policy process, and allows me, as the researcher, to capitalize on my insider status. Furthermore, CAS, as a framework, allows a researcher to look at policy and social problems more holistically (Hall & Clark, 2010) and with greater analytic leverage (Duit & Galaz, 2008). Chapter two presents the rationale for using a CAS framework in detail, reviews the recent use of CAS in policy analyses, and provides details of the CAS characteristics used in the research.

### **Complexity and a Case Study Methodology**

My research is a 20-year retrospective case study policy analysis of school choice approaches in one public school jurisdiction in the province of Alberta, Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). Specifically, this study seeks to describe and illuminate school choice policy changes, the policy process and decision-making in an “era of school choice,” and the implications for equity. My research studies the particular meanings, justifications, and impacts at the local level.

A retrospective, descriptive, and explanatory case study is the research methodology. The case study is retrospective in that it examines school choice policies in one organization over a 20-year time period. This case study is both descriptive and explanatory. This case study constructs narratives of policy changes and offers tentative, though not conclusive, explanations as to the causal mechanisms underlying the policy changes. Aligning with a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) approach, my research does not propose linear causal relationships but seeks to explain and uncover contextual conditions and interactions that contributed to policy changes. A case study methodology aligns with a CAS conceptual framework. Research on public policy using a CAS framework has consistently used case study as the methodological approach (Bovaird, 2008; Butler & Allen, 2008; Hall & Clark, 2010; Keshavarz, Nutbeam, Rowling, & Khavarpour, 2010; Lin & Lee, 2011; Rhodes, 2008; van der Steen et al., 2013).

The case study is well suited to the research because it provides an approach that can illuminate a decision or sets of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what results (Schramm, 1971; Yin, 2003). The case study deals with the “how” and the “why” questions in a real life context. Furthermore, the case study can deal with multiple sources of evidence: documents, interviews, and observations. The research uses various documents, semi-structured interviews, and personal reflections to investigate SRSDC school choice approaches. This multi-method approach allows for triangulation of evidence so school choice is investigated using several procedures and data sources (Fallon & Paquette, 2009).

In addition to case studies using a CAS framework, case study methodology has

also been employed in recent studies of education policies generally, and, school choice policies specifically (Fallon & Paquette, 2009; Gulson, 2011; Halverson & Plecki, 2015; Huerta, 2009; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Roda & Wells, 2013; Sale & Levin, 1991; Sattin-Bajaj, 2014; van der Steen et al., 2013; Vitteritti, 2005). Several researchers and theorists have commented on the value of the case study methodology as an approach that is interactive and aligns with the complexity of the school context (Scott & Villavicencio, 2009). In addition, the case study methodology allows for “thick” descriptions that have been identified as a future direction for policy research (Apple, 2006; Apple, Ball, & Gandin, 2010). Furthermore, the case study values experiences at the local level (Vitteritti, 2005; Yin, 2003) and has been used to show links between micro-institutional data and macro-organizational perspectives (see for example, Huerta, 2009 in relation to charter schools).

### **Complexity and Insider Status**

I approach my professional work and my research from a particular position—a position that was, and is, shaped by my personal and professional experiences. I am a person who achieved social and economic mobility through education but I also recognize that my experience is not “common” to other individuals from similar backgrounds. Recognizing and accepting the political nature and contested terrain of my research, as well as the influence of my personal political orientation, it is important that readers understand several of my defining personal, educational, and life experiences.

I am the youngest of three children and grew up in a “working class” family in rural Newfoundland. My father left school at the age of 13 due to familial economic

circumstances. My mother finished high school and was a stay-at-home mother until I entered school. My parents believed that education provided choice and opportunities. Unlike my older siblings, I was a focused and competitive student, often going beyond stated teacher expectations. My teachers reinforced my efforts, and I received exceptional grades and numerous academic recognitions. I believed in “meritocracy.” However, the limitations of “the educational promise” became obvious when I finished my first undergraduate degree, as a Bachelor’s degree did not improve vocational choices if one *chose* to live in rural Newfoundland. Prior to starting a second undergraduate degree, I worked in a secure facility for young offenders and learned about the realities of inequity through dialogue with young people in that facility. Upon completion of an undergraduate degree in education and a Master’s degree in counseling psychology, I chose to work with, and advocate for, “marginalized” people in both educational and correctional settings as a teacher, counselor, consultant, and principal. My professional journey has taken a different path in the last number of years. As a senior manager in a director role with the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) central services, I had opportunities to work with educational leaders, senior executives at the school division level, and school board trustees in the area of education policy and planning. I was, and am, sometimes dismayed by the passive acceptance of educational policies and practices and the lack of dialogue, discussion, or debate about the equity implications underlying current educational policies. However, as a former school principal and a current school division leader, I also understand the competing interests faced by educational leaders on a daily basis, the required navigation between the “ideal” and the

“possible,” and the required compromises and prioritizing. As a result of *all* of these experiences, I believe that people’s choices are the result of unique confluences of biological, personality, social, and systemic forces. My experiences suggest that negotiations of social belonging and power are prevalent at all levels of interaction. I have both a respect for, and frustration with, the capacities and limitations of human agency. I recognize both the need for, and the constraints of, structural boundaries. I understand the need for both personal responsibility and external accountability. I see and understand the use of power in relationships. I see and embrace complexity. I believe that individuals are paradoxes and organizations, as groups of individuals, are paradoxes.

Although I have deep reservations about the current education system, I continue to believe that with reform and with collective and strategic actions of concerned citizens, education may be more of an equalizing and liberating force at both the individual and societal levels. However, I am not naïve about the potential of education to alter the course of people’s lives and I acknowledge my perspectives have been shaped by the liberal premise that education improves one’s life chances - both social and economic. I recognize that educational policy must take into account that the issue of educational inequity is situated within broader social forces that cultivate inequity and inequality throughout society (Jordan, 2010). Furthermore, I am aware that policy analyses must not exaggerate education systems’ ability to affect social inequalities and inequities (Ball, 1997). However, the recognition of the limitations of the ability of the education system to redress social ills does not excuse educational policy makers and educational leaders

from examining policies and practices that contribute to the reproduction, and in some cases the acceleration, of educational inequities. The recognition of this limitation highlights the need for thoughtful and comprehensive policy development at the local level. My research is, ultimately then, a project that I am passionate about and it is deeply connected to my personal perspectives on equity and collective responsibility.

As noted above, I was employed by SRSDC during the course of my research. Although there are challenges when completing research where one is employed, particularly if one takes a more critical stance, there are also benefits to insider status when using a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework. In addition to generally higher levels of access to information, I also have greater understandings of the informal relationships and the informal rules – understandings and insights that are likely inaccessible to an outsider. Furthermore, the benefit of insider status was noted in a recent study of decision-making of parents in relation to school choice (Roda & Wells, 2013). To manage the challenges associated with bias and the potential tensions between my role as a researcher and role as an employee, purposeful sampling, providing rich descriptions, and an audit trail were used.

It is important that readers understand details of my insider status particularly in relationship to leadership roles. During my employment with SRSDC, I have served in three leadership positions: Student Services Consultant; Principal of an Alternative Junior High School; and Director of Early Learning, Planning, and Reporting. I am an active member of the leadership group including having served on the Administrative Leadership Council (2008–2009) and various division-level review committees (e.g.,

school boundaries, special education programming, division planning, leadership workshop planning, and public engagement initiatives). In my current role as a Director in Instructional Services, I provide information to the Board of Trustees regarding the division's results and initiatives. I believe I am seen as an advocate for equity in terms of access, process, and outcomes. Both in public and private settings, I offer my opinion and pose questions relating to equity. It is important to highlight that in my research, I was not in a position of student/researcher interviewing leader practitioners, I was a leader interviewing and interacting with leaders. I share capital with the interviewees that is afforded through my employment position.

Three areas of potential impact of my insider status were identified prior to the research: participant recruitment, the degree to which participants would be forthright in their interview, and data analyses. The following are my reflections on these potential impacts. In terms of participant recruitment and participation, I think my insider positionality influenced the study in primarily positive ways. It contributed to high level of participation as I have professional relationships with the majority of the interviewees. Thirty-one people were invited to participate in the study. Twenty nine consented and two did not respond to my invitation to participate. Furthermore, my background knowledge of the division, including the micro-politics and informal networks, contributed both to participants' willingness to disclose their insights and perspectives and my ability to ask probing questions. I, like the participants, am immersed in the complexity of the organization and a member of various informal networks. One limitation of my insider position related to "off the record" comments that occurred at the

end of some interviews. These comments related primarily to reflections on the past, the current organizational culture as well as participants' hopes for the future. These comments were not recorded and will not be directly quoted. I did paraphrase these comments in my reflection journal and they did impact my interpretation of broader implications. These comments added to my understanding of the complexities of the system. Finally, I did not feel that my "well known" position on equity negatively impacted interviewees' willingness to share their perspectives, as they were forthright in their positions even when known to be conflicting with my personal perspective.

Although sample interview questions were provided (Appendix E), the interviews were not limited to these questions and the interviews were conversational in nature. I was intentional in minimizing any leading questions and questions were open-ended.

Secondly, inherent in my day-to-day work with many participants is an understanding of the complexity of the work in schools. My genuine respect for the work of participants contributed to mitigating any negative impact of my known personal values. The majority of interviewees noted they enjoyed the experience, especially the opportunity to discuss complex issues. In terms of data analyses, I maintained a reflection journal and consistently tested alternative hypotheses and rival explanations and I offer no definite causal explanations. I do believe and stand by my assumption and belief that the leaders of SRSDC are well-intentioned and professional.

### **Overview of the Dissertation**

In summary, my research is an engagement with the complexities of school choice and equity within one school division. It is a 20-year case study that uses a

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework to demonstrate how the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) evolved from a school division with an enabling policy environment that encouraged, promoted, and celebrated choice to a school system with a more prescriptive policy approach that actively discouraged school choice. Furthermore, this case study demonstrates that SRSDC became a more inequitable school system in terms of individual access over the course of the case study and that matters of equity were reduced to economic considerations at the school level. The findings are used to offer suggestions on a way forward from an equity-led policy perspective using a CAS framework. A CAS framework offers possibilities to counter inequity as an organizational norm.

This dissertation consists of seven major sections: introduction, conceptual framework, literature review, methodology, policy narratives, analysis and discussion, and conclusions.

- Chapter Two, the conceptual framework, provides a detailed overview of a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework and its recent application to public policy analyses, presents the rationale for its use, describes the CAS characteristics used in my research in detail, and relates the characteristics to school divisions;
- Chapter Three, the literature review, sets the context for a school division as an open complex system by providing an overview of global and provincial policy trends, outlining what is meant by school choice, and summarizing the research relating to school choice outcomes;

- Chapter Four, the methodology, outlines the study site, participants, sources of the evidence, the stages of data analyses, and assumptions, strengths and limitation of my research;
- Chapter Five, the policy narrative, presents a description of policy changes over the course of the case study (1995–2015). The narratives are presented in four time periods (phases) based on when there were changes to the person in the position of superintendent;
- Chapter Six, the analysis and discussion, examines SRSDC as a complex adaptive system, offers tentative explanations and implications of the policy process and outcomes using the characteristics of CAS, and relates SRSDC choice policies to previous research. Specifically, this chapter examines the influences of a market conception of society, presents how metaphors are used to socially construct obligations and adaptive responses within an organization, and reviews the challenges of site-based leadership; and
- Chapter Seven, the conclusions, considers the implications of my research in terms of equity-led policy directions in school systems.

In this dissertation, considerable attention is given to Chapter Five and describing the policy narrative. This descriptive approach was taken for several reasons. The time period studied and the degree and scope of the policy changes required descriptive details so readers may engage with the policy process. Engagement with specificity reduces the likelihood that I, as the researcher, and the readers will make broad and/or simplistic generalizations. The level of detail is also intended to balance any potential for bias that

arises from my insider status. Furthermore, the detail provided in Chapter Five was guided by the need for dependability and confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the level of descriptive detail aligns and honours a Complex Adaptive Systems approach. A CAS approach requires due consideration of details as the characteristics and operation of a CAS emerge from the depth and breadth of the details. In other words, the complexity characteristics and the adaptability of the system emerge from the details and it would not be possible to demonstrate the operation and utility of a CAS framework without the detailed narrative provided in Chapter Five.

## **Chapter Two: Conceptual Framework**

The choice of a conceptual framework guides the research process in terms of the identification of relevant concepts/constructs, the selection of a research design, the definitions of key variables, sampling procedures, data collection, data analysis techniques, and the interpretation of findings (Schulz, 1988). It is important to note that many of the constructs key to my research are contested and in development; therefore, a unified theory was not used to guide my research project. This chapter details the conceptual framework used in my research—a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework with a value position lens influenced by critical research on educational reform.

I approached my research with a defined value position. Specifically, I believe educational leaders and policy-makers should strive toward the design and enactment of an education system grounded in the principles of a democratic education project. In its ideal state, a democratic education project is focused on achieving equity and promoting collective interests; education, as a primary and public good, plays a significant role in improving life chances and opportunities; and redistributive practices are seen fundamental to achieving these goals (Abowitz, 2008; Laberee, 2003; Ozga, 1999). A goal of my research was to understand how and why school choice policies evolved in one school division and what were the implications of these policies in relation to a democratic education project. It is important to note that the conceptual framework, Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), detailed below, does not have a particular value position. A unique element of my research is the combination of my value position with

the characteristics of CAS. I use CAS as a framework to understand the policy process and changes over time; however, I also draw on previous research on school choice and equity that is grounded in critical theory (Abowitz, 2008; Anderson, 2009; Ball, 2003; Ball, Maquire, & Braun, 2012; Blackmore, 2006). In other words, I use CAS with a critically-informed lens. Embedded within the descriptors of the CAS characteristics described below is policy analyses research from a critical perspective. In addition, Chapter three provides an overview of general literature on policy trends and school choice that informed my position.

The conceptual framework described below aligns with key assumptions in my research regarding education policy and the policy process: the policy process is dynamic and complex; analysis should bring together macro-level analysis of education systems with micro-level investigations; education policy is constituted and contested within specific social, economic, and political contexts; education policy includes texts, agents, intentions, and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings; and education policy responses are constructed in contexts by creative, but constrained, social agents (Ball, 1990; Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992; Levin, 2001; Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997).

The conceptual framework used in my research draws upon key elements of CAS that have been previously applied to public policy analyses (Bovaird, 2008; Butler & Allen, 2008; Hall & Clark, 2010; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Lin & Lee, 2011; Rhodes, 2008; van der Steen et al., 2013). The CAS characteristics were supplemented by work relating to policy cycles, policy enactment, and policy windows (Ball et al., 2012; Kingdon, 1995;

Levin, 2001). This chapter describes a CAS approach in detail including highlights of its recent uses in public policy research. Following the overview and rationale, the CAS characteristics employed in my research are described in detail and shown how they relate to school divisions.

### **Complex Adaptive Systems: An Overview**

Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) was used as a conceptual framework to structure the dissertation, to complete the data analyses, and frame the implications of the findings. It should be noted that CAS is better characterized as a conceptual framework rather than a complete theory (Keshavarz et al., 2010). CAS is based on systems thinking and complexity theory. Put simply, complexity theory posits that systems begin as collections of individual agents who organize themselves and create relationships. New structures and behaviours then emerge as the agents act and react to each other (Snyder, 2013). There are three primary rationales for choosing CAS as a conceptual framework: the principles of CAS align with my own personal viewpoints on human nature and organizations; the principles align with the contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes that emerged from data gathering and initial analyses; and CAS is being advocated as important framework for current policy analysis in education (Snyder, 2013). Furthermore, there is an increasing amount of empirical research which deploys the complexity frame of reference as an architecture for policy investigation and interpretation (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). Specifically, CAS have been used as a conceptual framework in many case studies of public policy research: organizational innovation capacity (Hall & Clark, 2010), adaptation to Labour government reform

policies by local authorities in the United Kingdom (Bovaird, 2008), understanding underperforming schools (van der Steen et al., 2013), school-based health promotion policy and intervention (Keshavarz et al., 2010), performance management policies in public organizations (Lin & Lee, 2011), urban regeneration in Ireland (Rhodes, 2008), and new public management policies in local governments in England (Butler & Allen, 2008). Finally, the Alberta College of School Superintendents highlights the importance of shifting toward a perspective of organizations as complex adaptive systems in their framework for school system success (Brandon, Hanna, Morrow, Rhyason, & Schmold, 2013).

Why is complexity theory generally, and CAS specifically, being advocated as a viable framework to develop and/or study public policy? The literature suggests a variety of factors: the capacity to see problems and solutions from a more holistic perspective (Hall & Clark, 2010), the promise of insights into the dynamics of organizational change which have to date been imperfectly mapped and modelled in social systems (Bovaird, 2008), the increased analytical leverage of the framework by acknowledging a much greater variety of system behaviour (Duit & Galaz, 2008), the capacity to address challenges faced by practitioners and integrate various theoretical strands in public administration (Rhodes, 2008), and the capacity to offer a new perspective on understanding the unintended and unforeseen consequences of planned policy interventions (Merali & Allen, 2011). Furthermore, research highlights the inadequacies of reductionist models. Van der Steen et al. (2013) note that policy theory seems to be caught in a language deficit that forces a static and linear perspective on the study of

policy effects that is inappropriate for the complex systems that are studied. In the area of education, Snyder (2013) notes that viewing governance issues in isolation and seeking reductionist approaches targeting specific policy areas or pedagogical changes is unlikely to yield positive, sustainable change on a large scale. Furthermore, Hall and Clark (2010) argue that in order to improve policy development and policy outcomes there is no choice for policy making and research to engage with complexity. Finally, linear approaches to policies, lacking both iterative feedback and flexibility, ultimately miss that complex problems cannot be adequately captured via linear approaches (Duit, Galaz, Eckerberg, & Ebbesson, 2010; Morrison, 2010). As the core of my research involves a complex social problem, the striving for educational equity, CAS is an appropriate framework that may provide insights for future action. It must be noted that the use of CAS as a conceptual framework in policy analyses is in its infancy (Bovaird, 2008) so my research findings must be considered with this limitation in mind. In other words, the research findings presented in this dissertation are tentative insights into the use of CAS in public policy analyses.

CAS is based on insights from systems thinking. There are different types of systems based on the degree of their complexity, openness, and cause and effect relationships. Systems can be thought of as simple, complicated, and complex (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). In simple systems, cause equals effect. This is the realm of the known. Situations can be clearly defined and appropriate responses identified. The policy maker's role is to delegate, use best practices, and communicate the standard operating procedures to be followed clearly and directly. In simple systems, recipes are essential,

recipes are easily replicable, expertise is helpful but not required, and best recipes give good results every time (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002). Very few, if any, people would argue that school systems are simple systems.

Complicated contexts are the realm of expertise and data analysis. In complicated systems, cause and effect are not self-evident but can be teased out through analysis. The policy maker's role here is to assemble expertise and encourage differing opinions. In complicated systems, policy-makers must avoid over-analysis of data that may negatively impact or impede decision-making. Once cause and effect are understood, interventions can be undertaken to tackle the problem, and the solution should work and be replicable. In complicated systems, formulae are critical, high levels of expertise are needed, there is a high degree of certainty in the outcome once the original issues are solved, and replication of success is likely (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002). Complicated contexts primarily result in technical challenges, which can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through an organization's structures, procedures and ways of doing things (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Duit et al. (2010) argue that educational initiatives, and the social sciences more broadly, often attempt to dwell in the realm of the complicated when, in fact, they are operating in the realm of the complex. If one considers strategic planning in educational organizations, standardized testing, and pre and post data collection following interventions, then one can see the continued prevalence of viewing educational work as being in the realm of the complicated. In addition, in the educational research field, the continued abundance of quantitative research, particularly in relation to school improvement, also lends credence

to the tendency for practitioners and some researchers to operate as if they are working in a complicated system (Snyder, 2013).

It is my perspective that education systems are complex systems. The complex is the realm of the unknown unknowns. Complex systems are spaces of flux and unpredictability. There are no right answers, only emergent behaviours, a concept discussed in detail later in this chapter. In complex systems, patterns emerge but they are not necessarily consistent or predictable. The policy maker's role in this space is to create safe spaces for patterns to emerge, which is best done by increasing levels of interaction and communication within the system to its largest manageable level. In complex systems, expertise is useful but not sufficient to solve complex problems. In complex systems, formulae have limited application and there is no assurance of success based on previous experience as generally the uncertainty of the outcome remains (Glouberman & Zimmerman, 2002). In complex systems, there are often adaptive challenges that can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties (Heifetz et al., 2009). Although leaders may wish that school systems were complicated, it is demonstrated in my research that they are, in fact, complex and there are equity implications when policy-making is approached as if education systems were complicated.

Similar to most constructs in my research, as noted previously, CAS is not a unified conceptual framework as there is uncertainty in the literature on a clear definition of complex adaptive systems (Wallis, 2008). As the term CAS is fraught with a myriad of interpretations and there is little academic consensus regarding exactly what CAS

means in a governance and policy reform context (Morrison, 2010), it is important to outline the characteristics of CAS used in the study. CAS are seen to exhibit several common characteristics, each of which are linked and interdependent, so each can be seen as both a cause and an effect of the other properties (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000; Casti, 1997; Holland, 1996; Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plsek, 1998). These characteristics are highly context specific and do not respond in the same way to the same stimulus at different times and circumstances (Anderson, 1999; Zimmerman et al., 1998). There are five CAS characteristics employed in my research:

- CAS are open systems with fuzzy boundaries but the local contexts matter;
- CAS have distributed control rather than centralized hierarchical control;
- CAS consist of groups of interconnected agents in a network and agents act in adaptive ways to pursue individual and collective interests that inform and shape the “rules” of the organization;
- CAS have continuous cyclical feedback loops; and finally,
- CAS have emergent properties that cannot be predicted based on individual characteristics.

The following section expands on these characteristics with specific explanations as to how the characteristics relate to schools divisions and how they were employed in the research process.

### **Complex Adaptive Systems are Open Systems with Fuzzy Boundaries**

The first characteristic concerns both the openness of the system and the local context. Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) are open systems with fuzzy boundaries;

however, the local contexts are important and are key considerations. The openness of the system and the importance of local context has been noted in school divisions in studies of health promotion policies and under-performing schools (Keshavarz et al., 2010; van der Steen et al., 2013). CAS have boundaries which separate the inside from the outside. A goal of a researcher of policy is to discern the degree of openness of the system—the degree to which the system and the agents interact with and are influenced by outside influences. In school divisions, there are abstract permeable boundaries related to ideas and belief systems because societal narratives and broader policy directions impact beliefs and policies at the local level. The degree of influence of broader trends and grander societal narratives is likely to be evident in both the perspectives of agents within the system and the symbolic policies of the organization. Symbolic policies represent the political dimension of policy-making (Anderson, 1979; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Symbolic policies typically contain abstract, vague, and broad goals. In the field of education, these policies are concerned with the nature and substance of educational provision and include policies that directly embody an educational aim, purpose, or rationale. Abstract ideas may also, at least partially, structure the drivers behind policy change (Levin, 2001). Given the level of policy borrowing, examinations of global and provincial policy trends are needed to understand policy at the local level. Chapter three provides a description of the broader policy context—both from global and provincial perspectives. The broader context overview includes trends related to public policies generally and school choice policies specifically.

Within a CAS framework, the local context is important in order to understanding

the network of relationships and the adaptive features of the system. School divisions are defined by distinct geographic boundaries but within a division there are unique communities and unique schools within those communities. Each school and community has distinct social, economic, cultural, and political identities, which impact their operational contexts and the operational context of the division. The importance of local contextual differences in policy enactment across a school division was noted by Keshavarz et al. (2010). Chapter four provides demographic details of the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) as a whole as well as the division's schools and communities. A key to research within an open system is to understand the local contexts and the intersections with the larger policy contexts.

In summary, the characteristic of a school division as an open system informs my questions for my research. How do the intersections of local and global construct the constraints and possibilities of local policies? Within this framework, one does not assume that a school division's policies mirror the broader political and policy ideas and trends, nor is the local approach unaffected by these broader trends. A researcher seeks to understand how and to what extent broader trends influence local agents, local policies, and organizations. Furthermore, the analyst using a CAS framework seeks to understand the interconnections and relationships between the broader trends and local behaviours. During the data gathering stage, in both the document analysis and the interviews, it was noted when and how "larger" policy narratives were reflected at the local level.

**Complex Adaptive Systems have Distributed versus Centralized Hierarchical**

## **Control**

The second characteristic of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) relates to control mechanisms. In CAS, central control is not only difficult but can be costly or even intrusive as it slows down the capacity of the system to react and adapt (Zimmerman et al., 1998). CAS have distributed control rather than centralized hierarchical control (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000; Holland, 1998; Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). Within their study of a school system, Keshavarz et al. (2010) noted that control was not fully distributed in school divisions. Understanding the degree and level of distributed control is particularly relevant to my research because, in this case, school choice policies were introduced with a plethora of additional educational reforms, including site-based leadership. Site-based leadership, in theory, provides schools and principals with more autonomy in decisions about their management, that is, in the use of their human, material, and financial resources (De Grauwe, 2005). Site-based leadership is a policy that is intended to increase the level and degree of distributed control across a school system. Decentralized decision-making may enhance the opportunity for principals to make autonomous decisions and take autonomous actions which may influence other principals' decisions and actions. In other words, there may be greater levels of reactions to actions. However, it is important to note that site-based leadership has been implemented in different ways. Hammad (2013) notes there are variations in what decisions were devolved to the school level and who receives the devolved authority. The time period covered in my case study provides an opportunity to examine how distributed control (site-based leadership) manifested and evolved in relation to school choice within one

school division.

### **Complex Adaptive Systems are Networks of Interconnected Agents**

The third characteristic of a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework relates to agents and their interactions. A CAS consists of a group of interconnected agents in a network. This characteristic means that the researcher should attend to text and process. Most contemporary approaches to policy analysis conceptualize policy as text as well as process and discourse (Ball, 1994; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009; Levin, 2001; Ozga, 1999; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Policy, from this perspective, includes the production of the text, the text itself, and the ongoing modifications to the text through the implementation into practice (Taylor et al., 1997). Research that focus on text contribute to our understanding how language is symbolic of power relationships and how language may influence the perceptions and behaviour of people but this type of research does not capture nor fully appreciate the complexity of human nature and the enactment of policy (Ball et al., 2012). Agents within a school division bring their personal experiences, their philosophies, contradictions, inconsistencies, perspectives, skills, values, passions, hopes, and dreams to their work. It would be naïve to assume that educational leaders share common beliefs about educational matters such as school choice or share political persuasions. Research, then, must seek to understand the belief systems of key agents. In my research, the focus is on agents in a leadership capacity, inclusive of senior leadership, principals, and school board trustees. The rationale for the selection of leaders was twofold: one was to maintain manageability in terms of the scope of the research and, secondly, the agents chosen had active engagement in the policy

process. My research was intentional in terms of inviting people with different experiences within the division to participate in the interview process. In terms of agents' actions, it was also acknowledged that in the "real" world at the local level, ideas, and values collide with pragmatic considerations so policies may be the result of what can be done versus what is ideal (Levin, 2001). In addition to ideas, there were discussions and examinations of pragmatic considerations that limit policy (such as resources, facilities, and busing).

In terms of agents' roles in the policy process, Ball et al. (2012) looked at how different agents engage with the process of policy enactment and these proposed roles were helpful to structure data analysis in my research. My research looks specifically at the roles of entrepreneur, enthusiast, receiver, and critic. Ball et al. (2012) looked at teachers within schools whereas my research looks at whether these roles apply to those in leadership positions. The first role of policy entrepreneurs describes people who originate or champion and represent particular policies. They are often forceful agents of change who are fully invested in, and identified with, their policy ideas. Second, policy enthusiasts are policy models who are influential and embody policy in their practice and are examples to others. Enthusiasts often plan and produce events, processes, and institutional texts of policy for others. Enthusiasts translate and model policy ideas into practice. Third, there are policy receivers who are those agents who are compliant and who look for guidance and direction. Their actions and decisions are bounded by the constraints and possibilities of the official policy. For receivers, policy is something that comes from someone higher in their organization or government and there is little active

engagement influencing the policy process. Finally, there are policy critics including political and principled critique (often originating from professional organizations and unions [such as the Alberta Teachers' Association which plays both roles in Alberta]) but equally important are the day-to-day critics who maintain counter-narratives to the policy direction. They may do so in meetings, staff rooms, and other informal settings. Critics offer a different way of talking and thinking about policy and make the formal policy narrative difficult to sustain or less credible.

In CAS models, researchers seek to identify how agents adapt in the pursuit of their individual or collective objectives and study how agent behaviour and their interdependencies among agents result in systemic outcomes (Rhodes, 2008). CAS acknowledge the tensions between individual and collective interests and the constant balancing of competing interests. Furthermore, CAS does not assume that individual agent's behaviours and decisions reflect a coherent or consistent ideology. CAS embraces the contradictions of human and organizational experiences and realities. Studies employing the CAS model also consistently note the operation of formal and informal rules that are shaped, re-shaped, and inform several aspects of agent behaviour (Bovaird, 2008; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Rhodes, 2008). Formal and informal rules exist as parallel but interacting systems. The formal rules align with the technical dimension of policy-making. The technical dimension deals with procedural policies. They are more concrete and provide direction to implementation (Anderson, 1979; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). In education, these policies are concerned with the administrative structures and include any policy that determines how educational provisions are

controlled and distributed. Prunty (1985) notes that attention to procedural policies is important, as they are concerned with how substantive policies are to be carried out. However, equally important in the CAS framework are the informal rules (Keshavarz et al., 2010). Informal rules are shaped and re-shaped by agents through their relationships and interactions. Informal rules reflect the social norms within an organization (Keshavarz et al., 2010). They may govern the interaction among agents as well as specific actions that may be taken at particular times and/or by particular agents. The formulation, reformulation, and interpretation of the rules of an organization validates the agency, although it may be constrained, of the agents and recognizes that people are not passive adopters of policy in a top-down process (Ball et al., 2012).

Given the length of this case study as well as the focus on adaptation and interactions, there was an opportunity to look at the emergence of new policies and changes to policy. The interactional and contextual foci of CAS aligns with the theory of policy windows proposed by Kingdon (1995) in which the conditions of possibility exist for agents to advocate for a policy direction. This perspective allows one not to just consider a policy as a solution to a defined problem; rather, a policy decision may result from political conditions, interactions, and adaptive responses of agents.

Agents' behaviors and interactions in combination with formal and informal rules can result in system outcomes. There are three mechanisms resulting in system outcomes that are important to my research including tipping points, threshold effects, and cascade effects (Duit & Galaz, 2008). CAS do not respond to gradual change in a smooth fashion primarily because these systems contain what has been denoted as threshold effects or

“tipping points.” The main point is that small events might trigger changes that are difficult or even impossible to reverse. In some cases the transition is sharp and dramatic. In others, although the dynamics of the system have shifted from one state to another, the transition itself may be slow but definite. Once thresholds are reached they have the potential to produce immense consequences, positive or negative, if they cascade across scale (Duit & Galaz, 2008).

Through a focus on agents, adaptive response and their interactions, a CAS framework offers insights in how policies become “live.” In the “real” world of policy enactment, time, and material constraints are coupled with human nature and policy change is not a neat and tidy implementation process (Levin, 2001). CAS looks at the enactment of policies (Ball et al., 2012) and not the implementation of policies. A focus on enactment shows the messy realities of school life, the webs of social relationships, and the relations of power. Policy enactment looks at the social reality within an organization (Morgan, 2006).

### **Complex Adaptive Systems have Cyclical Feedback Mechanisms**

The fourth characteristic of note in a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework is feedback mechanisms. Anyone who has worked in a large organization will understand the challenges of timely, clear, and “accurate” communication. In my experience, organizations are constantly trying to improve communication. Within a school division, there are formal processes, strategic plans, results reports, newsletters, newsletter articles, and email and/or telephone scripts. In an organization, the level of, and reliance on, formal communication plans may vary over time. However, within a

CAS, these strategies are flawed and insufficient as they ignore the informal networks of information sharing which influence the success and/or failure of any policy initiative.

As well as more formal channels of communication, agents within school systems receive information through sub-systems of different agents, and in turn, re-interpret and transfer information and interpretations to others (Keshavarz et al., 2010). In other words, information in a CAS is not shared in a linear fashion, it is shared, re-constructed, and shared again among various agents. These informal networks create continuous cyclical feedback loops. Information which is most often incomplete, misleading, and biased is shared, re-interpreted, shared, re-interpreted shared, etc. “Facts” are mixed with interpretations, perceptions, beliefs, and opinions in a complex continuous looping of feedback. Within a school division, and specifically in my research, the focus is on feedback loops among agents with a focus on leaders and parents.

### **Complex Adaptive Systems have Emergent Properties**

The final characteristic of a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework relevant to my research is emergence (Holland, 1998). Emergence is the creation of new properties that cannot be predicted based on antecedent actions or component elements of the phenomenon. Changes in agents’ roles, new rules, and shared vision have been noted as emergent properties in previous research (Rhodes, 2008). Emergence can help us understand the unintended consequences of policy. Furthermore, emergence also implies properties that may be at a higher level of abstraction than the antecedent actions/elements (de Wolf & Holvoet, 2005). Emergence provides a mechanism then to link the concrete and the abstract as well as the symbolic and the technical aspects of

policies. In terms of educational policy analysis, emergence has been used to study the unintended consequences of policies related to underperforming schools (van der Steen et al., 2013). In relation to my research, the focus is on whether there were outcomes of school choice policies that were unintended and unanticipated, specifically as they relate to matters of equity. Chapter three reviews the specific outcomes that have been noted in the literature in relation to school choice policies.

### **Summary**

The use of a CAS framework demonstrates the complexity of the work of educational leaders. Within a complex adaptive system with its diverse agents, distributed control, adaptive responses, continuous feedback, feedback loops, and emergent properties, senior leaders try and create an organizational identity that can shape the social reality of the organization (Morgan, 2006). Through an engagement with the complexity of an organization, its agents and interactions, the abstract and the concrete, the symbolic and the technical, my research offers insight into policy-making and leadership at the local level. CAS offers a lens to look at leadership and policy-making from a refreshing perspective.

### **Chapter Three: Literature Review**

A key characteristic of a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) framework is that systems are open and agents within systems are influenced, to varying degrees, by larger societal and professional narratives. Furthermore, it is a basic assumption of my research that policy analysis should consider specific social, economic, and political contexts and bring together macro-level analysis of education systems with micro-level investigations (Ball et al., 2012; Levin, 2001). Accordingly this literature review has a section that frames global and provincial policy trends providing a context for policy origins that may have influenced narratives and policies at the local level.

A second characteristic of CAS is the possibility of emergent properties; therefore, the second section of this literature review focuses on school choice policy research. The review of school choice research is needed for two reasons. First, this section provides the larger context of the school choice narrative that may influence the local perspective. Secondly, in order to understand the potential outcomes of school choice policies in terms of emergent properties, it is first necessary to provide an in-depth review of the literature.

#### **Section One: Broader Policy Context**

**Global trends.** Over the last 3 decades, there have been shifts in public sector policies generally, and educational policies provincially, nationally, and globally. The majority of people now live in liberal democracies (Dryzek & Dunleavy, 2009). Liberal and democratic ideals exist in tension. The manifestations of these political ideals exist, adapt, and change depending on the social and economic system to which liberalism is

linked. Liberal democratic states vary in terms of what states do and how they relate to the social and economic societies they govern. Liberal tenets push to define state powers narrowly while democratic tenets push to use political power to address social inequities. Generally speaking, in the postwar democratic settlement following the tenets of Keynesian economics, government intervention and the assurance of political rights were predominantly seen as the best way to address social ills. Within this context, elements of a democratic education project were articulated: A democratic education project, in its ideal state, is focused on achieving equity and promoting collective interests; education, as a primary and public good, plays a significant role in improving life chances and opportunities; and redistributive practices are seen fundamental to achieving these goals (Abowitz, 2008; Laberee, 2003; Ozga, 1999).

Over the last 20 years, it is argued that globalization and neo-liberalism were, and are, pervasive forces affecting society and education systems and there has been a shift in liberal democracies with a greater emphasis on liberal tenets (Ball, 1990). Several global policy convergences, have been noted: the perception of the need to reduce the role of the welfare state, the belief in greater cost management, greater centralization of policy control coupled with greater decentralization of implementation, and greater surveillance at the periphery (Bottery, 2002). This shift is said to have increased the focus on the individual, individual responsibility, and reduced the role of the state in addressing social problems (Blackmore, 2006). In other words, there has been a significant shift from collectivity to individuality. Individualization, according to Beck (1992), is the “disembedding of industrial society ways of life and the re-embedding of new ones, in

which individuals must produce, stage, and couple together their biographies themselves” (as cited in Lauder et al., 2006). Although individualization is not new (Lauder et al., 2006), Beck and Beck-Gernshiem (2002) argue that in recent years individualization is happening on an unprecedented scale and with unprecedented dynamism. The proliferation of individualization is said to have occurred within the context of stable relations of inequity, comparatively high standards of living, and a break in the historical continuity of traditional class ties and family supports. These trends are argued to have resulted in a more risk society filled with uncertainty as people rely more heavily on their own resources and their individual fate in the labour market. Beck and Beck-Gernshiem (2002) further offer that the value system of individualization is based on the principle of “duty to oneself” rather than a traditional view advocating a view of ethics based on social responsibility.

The above noted preference to reduce the role of the welfare state is said to have gone hand in hand with a shift in political culture in relation to equity. It has been argued that there was a shift away from a belief that the best way to address social problems was through government intervention and the assurance of personal rights to a political culture that sought to balance government intervention and personal rights with responsibility. This shift has been argued to be accompanied by a concomitant shift in the normative definition of equity as the normative definition of equity is now rooted in the distribution of access rather than the achievement of outcomes (Blackmore, 2000; Opfer, 2006). Furthermore, discourses of choice, competition, and accountability supplanted those of equity, comprehensiveness, and cooperation (Blackmore, 2006). The

choice discourse is said to be rights versus needs based and informed by the neo-liberal competitive individualism rather than the collective interests of social liberalism (Blackmore, 2006). In the era of choice, equity can be achieved by merely improving any individual's access to a range of market choices (Blackmore, 2000). Implicit in the choice era is that the right and ability to choose will alleviate inequities rather than a focus on specialized access, programming, and supports based on needs.

In addition, from the 1980s onwards, a more market-based approach is stated to have become more evident in government policy directions. In a market-based approach, there is a shift from the government as provider to the government as regulator whose role is to establish the conditions in which various markets are allowed to operate (Ball, 2000). Furthermore, market principles assume that the exercise of choice is morally good, people are rational agents, the market is efficient, and a level of inequity is natural (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Ozga, 1999). Some argue (Ball, 1997; Bates, 2008) that this market approach came to dominate government and transform public services whereas others caution against claims of social transformation (Levin, 2001). However, it is reasonable to state that the freedom to, value of, and right to "choose" has become more prominent.

In the 1980s, there was an emergence of the "New Right" political coalition, which embraced the tenets of market liberalism with elements of social conservatism. The election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and Ralph Klein in Alberta is argued to be evidence of the New Right (Kachur & Harrison, 1999). During this time period, public sector services in many countries and provinces

were increasingly aligned with the principles of new public management (Osborne & Garbler, 1992). The highly influential book, *Reinventing Government* (Osborne & Garbler, 1992), outlined 10 principles to build entrepreneurial public organizations: steer from a distance, empower communities rather than deliver services, encourage competition, focus on mission not rules, focus on outputs not inputs, shift to meet the needs of the customer not the bureaucracy, concentrate on earning not just spending, invest in prevention, decentralize authority, and leverage the marketplace to solve social problems. The ideas in this book were presented in plain language with specific case examples and there is an air of “common sense.”

Although there is a clear tendency toward convergence at the global level, there is less evidence of convergence in the level of details across countries (Green, 1997) and there are wide variations in the extent of public sector reform among the provinces in Canada. The next section focuses on the policy context in the province of Alberta.

**The Alberta context.** Historically, the province of Alberta has been argued to be the most “American” and different from the rest of Canada in terms of a stronger sense of individualism, social conservatism, and competitiveness (Helmer, 1995; Wiseman, 2007). Levin (2001) notes that Alberta’s conservatism is drawn from both traditional and neoliberal strands. The extent to which this is case may be debatable in 2015 but there is no doubt that there was a significant shift in Alberta public policy as part of the “Klein revolution” (Mindzak, 2015).

In Alberta, beginning at the end of 1993, the newly elected Klein conservative government followed many of the trends noted in the section of global trends,

undertaking a sharp cut in public spending and a high level of privatization. In Alberta, citizens were offered “choices” in a range of areas previously controlled by government. These services ranged from vehicle licensing and alcohol/liquor purchasing to education.

This case study is embedded within Alberta’s provincial school system. In terms of education policy, the Alberta education system was altered on an unprecedented scale in the 1990s (Webber, 1995). Bill 19, the *School Amendment Act*, was proclaimed in May 1994 allowing for the provision of charter schools, essentially public schools that are not under the direct control of a publicly elected school board. Secondly, in 1995–1996, in addition to the amalgamation of school boards, a new funding framework was introduced that severely limited local school boards’ authority to levy education property tax resulting in the province taking responsibility for funding education. The financial restructuring was coupled with changes in accountability mechanisms and rhetoric of equity and flexibility. The accountability framework introduced at this time included required 3-year strategic plans and annual education results reports. There were also changes to the expected roles of principals and parents including promotion of more decision-making for principals and an increasingly role for parents. In the mid 1990s, school divisions were facing a plethora of symbolic and material policy changes. These changes set the stage for the beginning of this case study.

In terms of school choice, the Alberta government is seen as supporting school choice. It has been argued that government’s positive stance on school choice began earlier than the 1990s. Alberta has been argued to have an extremely accommodating stance towards school choice as evidenced by the development of alternative school

funding in the 1970s, acceptance of private schools and the revised School Act of 1988 (Wagner, 1998). Recently, Alberta was also described as offering the greatest degree of school choice in Canada (Clemens et al., 2014). Alberta has seven categories of provincial school authorities: public, separate denominational, francophone, charter schools, independent, home-schooling, and one cooperatively federated school authority. There are several unique features of the Alberta education system (Hiemstra & Brink, 2006): Alberta maintains support for Catholic schools, over one half of school jurisdictions operate Hutterite colony schools, Alberta was the first province to offer public funding to private independent schools, Alberta permits faith-based alternative programs, and Alberta is the only province to allow charter schools.

The breadth of choices has led Alberta to be called a choice enhancement state (Koysis, 2003). Furthermore, a report commissioned by the Alberta School Boards' Association (ASBA), the provincial advocacy coalition representing public schools board trustees, states that Albertans highly value educational choice (Cymbol, 2009). Currently Alberta Education actively promotes choice. For example, their website states,

Parents have a wide range of options to choose from within the public education system: public schools, separate schools, francophone schools, charter schools—as well as alternative programs and virtual programs offered by school boards—and home education. They may also choose to send their children to private schools. The Alberta government supports choice in education to ensure student and community needs are met. (Alberta Education, n. d.)

The Alberta *School Act*, the predominant provincial education legislation, outlines five

guiding principles that represent the substantive or symbolic elements of the legislation: access to quality education, equity, flexibility/choice, responsiveness, and accountability. These five fundamental principles purportedly define a first-rate education for every child. The *School Act* provides the formal rules within the education system. Access to a quality education, equity, flexibility, and choice are most relevant to my research.

Access to quality education is defined as every student having the right of access to a quality basic education that is consistent with the student's abilities. Equity is described as all students having equal access to a quality basic education regardless of where in the province they live. Flexibility and choice are articulated as parents and students having opportunities to choose schools and programs in the public education system, within standards and policies set by the provincial government.

Two sections of the *School Act*, sections 21 and 32, provide the legislative framework for two choice options within the Alberta public school system. Section 21 outlines the parameters of alternative programs, which are programs that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter, or use a particular teaching philosophy. Section 32 outlines legislative expectations for charter schools, essentially public schools that are not operated by a school board. Further details of this legislation will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

Although Alberta Education purportedly values choice, the *School Act*, has provisions that support limiting choice options, particularly for parents who "choose" a public/separate school board. Specifically, sections 44 and 45 serve three functions: They establish the residency of students, they provide authority for boards to establish

attendance areas for its resident students, and they give direction for enrolment of non-resident students. Section 45 is important as it can, and often is, differentially interpreted and applied.

What do the *School Act* sections and the Alberta Education choice rhetoric mean for school divisions? There is a tension between the promotion, expectation, and value of choice with the actual limitations enabled by legislation. Furthermore, as the provincial government controls education funding, economic constraints may influence school divisions' attempts to restrict choice through school and program closures. Cymbol (2009) notes that the 1990s extension of educational choice has placed a burden upon schools boards in terms of resources, governance, priority setting, and relationships among school authorities. ASBA supports choice but states that public boards are "forced to compete with other educational service providers in order to attract students and increase enrolment" (Cymbol, 2009). Although school choice is viewed positively by ASBA, the organization does recognize the risks of competition including the potential to detract from quality of current programming and the potential redirection of resources to non-instructional areas, such as transportation (Cymbol, 2009).

The current *School Act* has been reflective of the educational policy of the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta as the party was in power from 1971 to the spring of 2015. In the last several years, Alberta Education has undergone an extensive review and introduced new legislation, the *Education Act*. Alberta's new *Education Act* was passed in the legislature and received Royal Assent on Dec. 10, 2012. Sections (4), (10), and (19) of the *Education Act* reaffirm the residency of students as well as the

legislative commitment to charter schools and alternative programs.

Cymbol (2009) notes that the education system in Alberta today with its emphasis on choice and diversity exists because it is what the majority of Albertans want and are prepared to support. Furthermore, he states there are political risks for elected representatives associated with changing the choice options. Alberta's political parties released policy platforms in the spring of 2015. The *Prentice Plan - Choose Alberta's Future* did not suggest any policy shifts regarding educational choice (Alberta Progressive Conservative Party, 2015). The Alberta Wild Rose Party's party platform confirmed their support of educational choice in that they committed to "protect a parent's right to choose what school their child attends (Public, Catholic, Francophone, Public Charter, Private, or Homeschool)." The Wild Rose also committed to maintain the current model for school funding (Wild Rose Party, n. d.). Both the Alberta Liberal Party and the Alberta Party promised to eliminate public funding for private schools (Alberta Liberal Party, 2015; Alberta Party, 2015). Only the Alberta New Democratic Party did not articulate a position on educational choice as part of their platform; however, their campaign platform included a commitment to predictable funding and a reduction in school fees (Alberta New Democratic Party, 2015). In the spring of 2015, the New Democratic Party was elected as the governing party in Alberta. It is unclear how the change in the governing party will impact the provision of educational programming. At the time of writing, proclamation of the Education Act has been delayed and a further public consultation has been promised.

In the exploration of how and why school choice policies changed in Suburban

Rural School Division Case, it is important to know if, and how, local policies and individuals' perspectives were influenced by provincial and global social, economic, and political trends. Were broader trends used to shape the local narratives of the various manifestations of local policies?

## **Section Two: A Review of School Choice Research**

This section reviews the research and theoretical literature around school choice. School choice does not mean any one thing and is, in and of itself, a complex phenomenon. This section first presents an overview of what school choice includes including political considerations followed by the structure of choice programs. The section concludes with a review of the research related to school choice policy outcomes. Outcomes are presented based on a matrix: student outcomes, school outcomes, and society outcomes. As my research examines the equity implications of school choice policies at the local level, this review of research and theory is needed to situate the case study in the broader school choice literature.

**What is school choice?** School choice is cited as the most hotly contested issue in public education today (Hill, 2010). Regardless of the level of contestation about what school choice actually is and the outcomes that may result, school choice, in its various forms, is pervasive (Brighouse, 2008). Musset (2012) reports that more than 26 of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have increased school choice opportunities for parents over the last 25 years. Furthermore, a recent Canadian study (Davies & Aurini, 2011) found that one third of families chose an alternative to a regular public school and this percentage increases to two-thirds when

residential selection is included as a component of the choice process. Despite being considered normative (Ball, 2008), as stated previously, school choice remains highly politicized and the discussion, debate, and research are susceptible to rhetoric (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007). In a recent report by the Fraser Institute, a politically conservative policy think tank and supporter of school choice, it is noted that there is a great deal of misunderstanding regarding school choice and competition within the Canadian public school system (Clemens et al., 2014).

Misunderstandings and debates at least partially result from the reality that school choice does not mean any one thing—its forms are nuanced. As Moe (2001) notes, there is both a structure to choice systems (i.e., specific frameworks of basic government rules) and there is a choice of structures (i.e., people who are in a position of putting together policy combinations have flexibility). The next section outlines various political positions, structures to choice systems, and choice structures.

**Covert and overt choice.** An important consideration in relation to the rhetorical and political positions associated with current school choice debates is that it mostly refers to overt school choice schemes. However, “choice” existed in a more veiled form prior to active government encouragement of choice. The veiled form of choice, *covert* choice, is based on geography and is typically represented by the allocation of students to schools by geography and neighbourhood. Covert choice is exercised through housing purchases and family mobility as middle class parents are usually able to opt to live in the catchment area of a “good” school (Heath, 2009). There are segregating effects of this model (Brighouse, 2008; Hill, 2002) and covert choice remains an important

consideration as variations of “attendance areas” continue to exist. The majority of schools in OECD countries combine geographical assignment of students to schools with certain flexibility beyond their initial school assignment (Musset, 2012).

The current debate over school choice policies relates to the active intervention of government to promote *overt* parent choice. Brighthouse (2000) defines school choice as the provision of schooling that officially and directly gives substantial weight to the preferences of parents regarding the allocation of their children to schools. This intervention typically results in some type of introduction of market mechanisms, parental preference/consumerism, and competition among schools within an educational jurisdiction (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008). One consistent factor is that all *overt* school choice has the effect of redistributing, to varying degrees, students with different amounts of and different types of cultural and social capital (Howe, 2008).

**Political considerations.** The impetus for the introduction of school choice is debated. Some argue school choice is at least a partial response to unjust school practices (Abowitz, 2008) while others argue that school choice is tightly associated with a politically conservative agenda to reform public services (Ball, 2003; Howe, 2008). Given the debates, it is possible to identify many political school choice advocacy positions (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007): Libertarians claim that government limitation of parental choice is an inappropriate intrusion of the government in the private domain, neo-conservatives argue that school choice affirms parental prerogatives to promote traditional family values, neo-liberals believe that market forces and competition will lead to school improvement in terms of efficiency and effectiveness, the “new” civil right

believe that school choice will empower disadvantaged communities, and liberals support choice based on the notion of equity and providing greater options that are better suited to children and families. On the other hand, opponents to school choice also come from varied political perspectives: those on the conservative side may worry about schooling promoting specific identity politics while those who are more progressive may argue that school choice leads to further stratification and disempowerment of disadvantaged families.

**Structure of choice.** There is little doubt that there is a wide range of policy alternatives available to policy-makers, which may explain the existence of often contradictory, and sometimes incoherent school choice approaches. What are examples of overt choice structures? The degree of regulation over student assignment and selection in schools creates the structure for choice systems (Cobb & Glass, 2009). Open enrolment and school vouchers, first proposed by Friedman (1955), typically have the least regulatory oversight and are most closely aligned with the libertarian perspective. Within this structure, it is theorized that as bureaucratic constraints are minimized and market forces unleashed, consumer behaviour and competition will improve program delivery, innovation, efficiency, and ultimately, student outcomes (Hill, 2002). In open enrolment voucher systems, there are several key assumptions: The exercise of choice is morally good; parents are rational agents; competition and inequities are natural; and efficiency is a worthy goal, in and of itself (Hill, 2010).

There are few examples of the minimally regulated school choice structure described above. Political explanations are often cited as the reasons for the restricted

number. There are many proposed reasons for the lack of broader appeal: political opposition, criticism from academics and vested interested groups, policies or regulations that favour incumbent administrative and interest groups, an entrenched system built on procedure and compliance, a continued emphasis on protection and secrecy about resource use and productivity, and time lags intrinsic to the operation of a system of choice (Clemens et al., 2014; Hill, 2010). Other policy researchers (Brighthouse, 2008) argue that the limited number of unrestricted school choice options results from the uniqueness of the educational marketplace. Parent information and choice patterns, the transaction costs (e.g., student transitions), and the influence of the producers in the marketplace limit the applicability of market principles to education. Finally, despite a wealth of research in the area (detailed in a subsequent section), the results are inconclusive as to whether choice has positively impacted student outcomes, innovation, or efficiency.

**Choice structures.** Choice structures, inevitably then, have varying degrees of regulation. The variations typically involve four areas: selection processes, funding and fees, parent information, and the degree to which residence determines access to providers (Brighthouse, 2008). Generally speaking, just as open enrolment schemes are aligned with the libertarian perspective, targeted/controlled school choice structures are considered more aligned with the progressive ideas of equity. Magnet programs, differentiated student vouchers based on needs, charter schools, and targeted school demographic profiles are examples of the varying choice structures. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide details of the many nuanced approaches

to regulated school choice policies, there are several questions that may be asked of controlled school choice schemes: Are schools able to ask for extra fees above and beyond government funding, to what extent are schools able to select students, are choice options available that are “attractive” to the majority of families, to what extent do other policies support choice (e.g., transportation), and to what extent are parents supported in relation to choice options and processes? These questions examine the procedural elements of substantive policies and help determine whether a choice approach is market-led or equity-led (Brighthouse, 2008).

In the end, there are no objective criteria to determine which choice approach is “best.” From a personal viewpoint, I value equity for families and would support an equity-led policy approach. However, different people give priority to different values (e.g., freedom of choice, equity, community, efficiency). Equity may be of primary concern in some places whereas efficiency may be the primary driver in other situations. A key to school policy analysis is to determine what values underpin policy, what the desired effects are, and whether there are gaps among the policy, its desired effects, and its operation.

**School choice outcomes.** School choice schemes vary significantly in terms of intention, design, and practice. Due to the variation in policy approaches, it is not possible to make generalized claims about the outcomes of school choice policies. Furthermore, no policy will produce all the desired effects and all policies inevitably produce unanticipated, although not always negative, results (Jordon & McKeown, 1988). As stated previously, research in the area of school choice is fraught with

methodological issues and politically driven polarization; as such, the research on school choice processes and outcomes has been mixed and contested (Lubienski & Dougherty, 2009). That said, there is a wealth of research in this policy area. Levin (2001) suggests using a matrix to assess policy outcomes based on three levels of impact: students, schools, and society. The following review of school choice policy research is presented based on these three levels of outcomes.

***School choice outcomes: Students.*** In evaluation studies related to student outcomes, researchers often rely on positivist approaches and use quantitative analyses of student achievement data as proxies for policy success. Within my research paradigm, the primary outcomes of school choice are heavily contested (DeBray-Pelot et al., 2007) but systematic studies in a broad array of different countries have yet to demonstrate significant improvements in academic achievement (Woolman & Fleisch, 2006). However, it is possible to identify variations in effects on student achievement depending on the type of school choice scheme. For example, in the United States, lottery vouchers systems have been found to have a significant positive impact on student achievement (Forster, 2013) and on student attendance and achievement among males (Hastings, Neilson, & Zimmerman, 2012). In addition, in Connecticut, magnet schools with a lottery system of selection showed positive growth in student performance (Bifulco, Cobb, & Bell, 2009), and in a voucher system in Milwaukee, students showed modest performance effects in reading (Chakrabarti, 2008). Small but positive improvements in student achievement in primary schools were also found following the introduction of open enrolment schemes in the Netherlands (Naoilly, Vujic, & Aouragh, 2009).

However, some researchers report that the effects of competition and choice depend on the measurement used (Gibbons, Machin, & Silva, 2008). Furthermore, several studies indicate no effect on student achievement following the introduction of market-based reforms and competition in the United States (Ladd, 2002) and Great Britain (Gibbons et al., 2008).

What about other indicators of student success? Booker, Sass, Gill, and Zimmer (2008) report charter school students in Chicago and Florida had higher attendance and greater college completion as compared to other students in the school district. However, negative effects have also been reported in school choice schemes where students did not gain entrance to their first choice of school. Heath (2009) reports students' perceptions of their school's position affected their feelings about their education, their identity as learners, and their future possibilities.

*School choice outcomes: Schools.* The second level of potential impacts encompasses school operations, adult behaviours and feelings, and relationships. How has choice impacted school operations and programming? One of the claims made by proponents of choice and competition is that these policies would lead to increased educational innovation and diversification as schools respond to consumer demand and attempt to increase their position in a market hierarchy (Hill, 2002; Moe, 2001). However, in large-scale comparative studies, including international data, there is little evidence to suggest that innovation is causally related to market mechanisms (Lubienksi, 2006, 2009). Other government interventions, such as the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, seem to have stronger links to pedagogical and curricular innovation than

choice per se (Musset, 2012). An interesting effect of choice in Alberta, as Hiemstra and Brink (2006) note, is that the competitive market model may have unintentionally led to an increase of faith based options, defined as a school program that publicly identifies as religious and openly affiliates with a religious group or are run by a religious group/society in public schools.

If school choice and market mechanisms do not appear to have a causal relationship with innovation in schools, how have they impacted schools in other ways? Evidence suggests school administrators face ethical dilemmas as they mediate the tensions between their values as school leaders and school choice policy directions (Anderson, 2009; Gleeson, 2010). As Gewirtz et al. (1995) note, schools are often reluctantly implicated in the market and they “make the best of it” but face tactical decisions trying to balance competing values. This dilemma is most aptly demonstrated in selection processes as research has shown that principals engage in promotional activity and in selection processes that attract more desirable students to their schools in order to enhance their market position (Ball & Youdell, 2009; Lubienski, 2006; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009). Furthermore, Pearce and Gordon (2005) claim covert selection processes, maneuvering behind the scenes, arguments among schools, and clashes of policies occur and are completely hidden from parents. In addition, there is evidence to suggest that principals’ work has changed in response to competitive pressures. Principals have been found to engage in more marketing and promotional activities (Ladd & Fiske, 2003) and pay greater attention to resource management (Bagley, 2006). Finally, competition has been linked to less collaboration among schools

(Bagley, 2006). School choice policy options and enactments are intertwined with school finance, decentralization, autonomy, and accountability.

There is research suggesting that parents' behaviour and feelings are also impacted by school choice schemes. Nogueira (2010) notes both parental strategic behaviour and resultant anxiety when parents engage in behaviours that benefit their individual children at the expense of other children. In Alberta, Bosetti (2004) reports that active school choosers were more likely to be satisfied with their school. Additional research has also examined parents' decision-making approaches and evidence suggests a high level of engagement is required to benefit from choice. Active choosers talk to adults in their social network, engage with teachers and principals, and visit schools (Bosetti, 2004; Holme, 2002; Ladd, 2003). Non-choosers, who are often disadvantaged families, rely on the physical proximity to schools and convenience (Bosetti, 2004; Reay & Ball, 1998) and are more likely to be influenced by non-instructional costs, such as transportation (Waslander, Pater, & van der Weide, 2010). In addition, less educated and disadvantaged parents face more difficulty gauging the information required to make informed school choice decisions or have different preferences over school characteristics (Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2005). Parents' belief systems about their schools and neighbourhood have been shown to play a significant role in school choice rather than academic measures (Bell, 2009; Theobald, 2005). Finally, the OECD (2006) suggests that parents are becoming more demanding in relation to school information as they seek to ensure that their children have privileged access to the best schools and program.

***School choice outcomes: Society.*** The societal impacts associated with school

choice policies relate to matters of public expenditure and efficiencies, community, and equity. Results of research relating to efficiency are inconclusive. Hoxby (2000) claims there were substantial efficiency gains following the introduction of choice as measured by increased student achievement and reduced expenditures. More recent studies note increases in expenditures following the introduction of competition and market mechanisms (Bifulco et al., 2009; Chakrabarti, 2008). However, this is an era of increased scrutiny of public expenditures so the question of efficiency remains relevant in the political realm of the policy process.

Many argue that efficiency is not as important as other social implications of school choice policies. In terms of community, there is evidence to suggest an intersection between school choice policies and class-based discourses. For example, research demonstrates a correlation between enrolment in school choice programs with middle and higher socioeconomic status (SES) groups (Apple, 2004; Ball & Lund, 2010; Gewirtz et al., 1995). Class has also been implicated in parents' decision-making in South Africa (Woolman & Fleisch, 2006), in England (Pearce & Gordon, 2005), and Alberta (Bosetti, 2004). Several studies have attempted to profile active choosers and research suggests that active choosers are more likely to be white, more highly educated, and have higher incomes (Ball, 2008; Bifulco, Ladd, & Ross, 2009; Bosetti, 2004; Davies & Aurini, 2011; Holme, 2002). Furthermore, evidence is available that suggests families use choice programs to change children's peer groups to be of higher SES (Koedel, Betts, Rice, & Zau, 2009) or maintain middle class enrolment patterns (Dronkers & Avram, 2010). Increased levels of segregation based on SES, particularly for schools at the

bottom end of the local market hierarchy, have been noted in Wales, England (Taylor, 2009) and South Africa (Woolman & Fleisch, 2006). These results lead some to argue that school choice furthers social fragmentation, enhances a two-tiered education system (Gewirtz et al., 1995), and secures middle class advantage (Ball, 2003).

School choice has also been intertwined with race-based discourses. In Canada, studies argue that school choice, specifically in Vancouver, provides the conditions for increasingly racialized inner city areas (Gulson, 2011) and that White middle class parent practices and school choice are underpinned by historical and contemporary operation of ethno-linguistic hierarchies (Yoon & Gulson, 2010). Ethnic and socio-economic school segregation were also found to increase after the introduction of open enrolment in the United Kingdom (Reay, 2004) and New Zealand (Fiske & Ladd, 2000).

Perhaps due to both the fear and evidence of increased segregation resulting from more unregulated school choice approaches, recent policy analyses have examined the effects of specific choice structures in local contexts with an implicit or explicit intention to offer policy suggestions to improve the equity of school choice policies. Typically research evaluates particular choice structures and uses enrolment patterns and achievement data as proxies for equity. Choice structures that promote equity are controlled/regulated choice programs have several common characteristics. They provide assistance to families in terms of accessing information, provide transportation to the choice programs, provide student supports at the school level, and often have weighted funding models based on students' needs (Cobb, Bifulco, & Bell, 2009; Cobb & Glass, 2009; Holme & Richards, 2009; Mussett, 2012). Furthermore, studies note the

importance of due consideration of social and historical inequities in the construction of choice sets when designing how choice information is provided to families (Bell, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2009; Holme, 2002). Finally, the OECD recently released a study suggesting policy directions that align school choice and equity (Musset, 2012). This study notes the importance of examining fees, selection criteria, parent information and costs, types of choice programming, and complementary policies that align with equity.

Policy analysis research also examines school choice policies in terms of moral-political perspectives, particularly notions of justice. The importance of intentionality and policy alignment emerge from my research. For example, Abowitz and Karaba (2010) note that a laissez-fair system of charter schools in the United States has resulted in rewarding those with wealth but has done little to redistribute capital to enable poorer communities or help groups to create schools in their own educational interests. Furthermore, Codd (1993) examined educational reforms in New Zealand and argues there is a fundamental philosophical tension between the substantive policies that can be justified in terms of social justice and the correlative procedural policies derived from market-liberalism.

The complexity of the school choice policy issue is clear from this review of relevant research. General judgments about school choice are not possible as school choice does not represent any one thing. It is important, and necessary, to ask questions at the local level. What values are reflected in school choice policies? For whom and on what grounds is choice available? What are the impacts of local choice policies?

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

The research on school choice uses various methodologies. One point of consensus is that there is no agreement in the research literature about the optimal methodological approach (Lubienski, Weitzel, & Lubienski, 2009). As with any research, the quality of the design is judged by the research questions, a clearly defined unit of analysis, the logic of the links between the data and the questions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2003). The methodology must align with the conceptual framework and as noted in the introduction case study methodology has been used consistently in studies employing a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework (Bovaird, 2008; Butler & Allen, 2008; Hall & Clark, 2010; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Lin & Lee, 2011; Rhodes, 2008; van der Steen et al., 2013) as case study research is a means of investigating complex social units (Merriam, 2014). A retrospective case study design was the methodological approach for the research.

Case study is a valuable research methodology as it provides an approach that can illuminate a decision or sets of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what results (Schramm, 1971; Yin, 2003). The case study deals with the how and the why questions in a real life context. In a case study, the researcher is interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 2014). In my research, two of the three research questions relate to the how, why, and what of school choice policies in one school division. The research questions, how and why did school choice policies emerge and evolve in the school division over time and how did school choice policies impact equity at the local level, are questions

that are appropriately investigated using a case study approach.

In my research, I used the case study definition offered by Cresswell (2007). Specifically, case study research is a qualitative research approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system over time through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Cresswell, 2007). My research meets the criteria of Cresswell's definition of a case study: the unit of an analysis is a bounded system; the bounded system was studied over time; and multiple sources of information were used. What makes a case study a case study is not the topic under investigation but the unit of analysis, a bounded system (Merriam, 2014). A bounded system is a single entity around which there are boundaries (Merriam, 2014). In my research, the bounded system was one public school division, Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). SRSDC is a bounded system in that it is a single school jurisdiction with defined geographic boundaries and unique policy, governance, and leadership structures. Although school jurisdictions in Alberta are established within provincial legislative and regulatory parameters, they have considerable flexibility in terms of local policy development and enactment. The relative policy and practice autonomy at the local level, therefore, provides justification for a school jurisdiction to be considered a bounded system within the provincial context. The second characteristic of a case study relates to the length of time the case is studied. A unique and valuable characteristic of my research is the length of time over which the school system was studied. Specifically, the school system was studied over a 20-year time period and the starting point of the research was the formation of the school jurisdiction as an organizational entity. The

third characteristic of a case study relates to the sources of information. Case study research entails in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. In my research, documents and interviews were the two primary sources of data. The documents that were analysed, detailed below, were extensive ranging from policy documents, various meeting minutes, school jurisdiction strategic plans and reports, as well as enrolment data and school fee information. In addition, twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted representing a wide variety of people who had active roles in policy development and/or enactment. Although not exhaustive, the data set was extensive, drawing on policy documents, division strategic plans, and the lived experience of educational leaders over time. In summary, my research meets the criteria of case study research as it investigated a bounded system, a school jurisdiction, over a 20-year period employing a wide variety of sources of information as a means to understand the “why” and “how” of school choice policies.

### **The Case: The Study Site**

The single case study was conducted in one public school jurisdiction, Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC), in the province of Alberta. The time period for the case study was from September 1995 to December 2014. The starting point of the study was chosen as it represents the formation of SRSDC school division within a new legislative and funding environment. The school division was chosen as it has several unique features: SRSDC is a suburban-rural school jurisdiction creating unique challenges and tensions from governance, policy, and operational perspectives; the suburban area of SRSDC is situated in close proximity to large urban area where school

choice is embraced by educational providers and expected by the community; and there have been significant changes to school choice policy directions during the case study time period. Finally, SRSDC was chosen because of my employment with the jurisdiction and therefore the ability to add participant observation data to the analysis. Contextual details about SRSDC are presented in Chapter five.

### **Sources of Evidence**

The study used two primary sources of evidence: documents and semi-structured interviews.

**Document analysis.** A variety of documents were used in my research. The documents analysed are specific to the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). Alberta Education documents (e.g., the *School Act* and *Business Plans*) are referenced to provide context but are not included as part of the analysis as the school division is the unit of study and part of my research to understand how provincial policy was translated and enacted at the local level. In other words, provincial policy and legislation set some parameters but the school division has flexibility to develop and enact policy, and therefore local documents are the most appropriate and relevant to the research questions.

The list below details the documents used as sources of evidence. Documents one through nine are/were publicly accessible.

1. Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) Strategic Education Plans (from 1995–2014). These plans are required annually based on the Government of Alberta Accountability Act. Although the documents' specifications, including its name, have changed over the time period in

question, the plans typically include profile of the division, goals, outcomes, strategies, challenges, and opportunities. One name, Strategic Education Plan, was chosen and used throughout the dissertation for clarity purposes.

2. SRSDC Annual Education Results Report (AERR) (from 1995–2014). The AERR is required annually based on the Government of Alberta Accountability Act. Although the documents' specifications have changed over the time period in question, the reports typically include progress toward division goals, required provincial and local performance measures, and financial information.
3. SRSDC monthly Board of Trustees meeting minutes and Board highlights for the period of January 1995 to December 2014. Boards of Trustees are established under the legislative authority of the Alberta School Act. School Boards are required to maintain documentation of all proceedings of the board and committees of the board (School Act, Section 74). The detail in Board minutes varied over the course of the case study. Board minutes were very detailed from 1995 to 2000 and often included verbatim records of motion debates. Minutes were less detailed but contained a summary of motion debates from 2001–2005. Minutes lacked detail from 2006–2009 and frequently only referenced motions and vote counts. In recent years, minutes, once again, include a summary of discussions. Board highlights were used from 2006 to present to supplement Board minutes; however, it is important to note that Board highlights are the production of the Communications

Department and thus would serve information sharing and public relations purposes.

4. SRSDC Committee of School Councils (COSC) meeting minutes for the period of October 2000 to December 2014. COSC is not a legislated body. It is a parent group comprised of school council chairs, SRSDC trustees, and senior leaders whose purpose is to discuss educational issues and trends, specifically relating to SRSDC (SRSDC website, 2013). Meeting minutes are posted to the division's website. Meeting minutes from January 1995 to May 2000 were not available.
5. SRSDC policies and administrative procedures relating to alternative programs, transportation, school choice, funding, fees, and attendance areas and boundary exemptions for the period of September 1995 to December 2014.
6. News releases and news articles, where available, relating to school choice/ boundary exemptions the period of January 1995 to December 2014.
7. Parent information, where available, relating to school choice/ boundary exemptions the period of January 1995 to December 2014.
8. Feedback collected as part of the Re-Imagining SC County Schools. In February 2012, SRSDC launched a public consultation process to gather information about proposed school boundary changes in suburban SC County. Although school choice and boundary exemptions were not within the scope of the project, the division received feedback on these issues. The feedback

received was reportedly used to influence the 2013 changes to the boundary exemption process (SRSDC, 2013).

9. Designated, non-designated, and alternative program enrolment data from 2002–2014 were used as indicators of policy outcomes. The enrolment data are based on the annual September 30th enrolment count. Enrolment data are presented as information to the Board of Trustees on an annual basis.
10. Participant Observation Journal. Since June 2002, I have maintained a leadership journal reflecting on key experiences including personal conversations with colleagues, parents and students, leadership meetings, specific policy directions, and division planning processes.

**Semi-structured interviews.** Research may employ structured, semi-structured, and/or open-ended interviews (Merriam, 2014). My study employed semi-structured interviews to gather information related to school choice policies, policy drivers, policy changes, policy enactment, and policy outcomes. Interviewees were also asked about their personal perspectives on choice and the policy process. The interviews were semi-structured in that the interview guide included a mix of more and less structured questions that were used flexibly (Merriam, 2014). There was not a pre-determined order and the majority of interviews were conversational in nature with indirect references to the proposed interview questions. At the end of each interview, the proposed questions were reviewed and discussed to ensure that the proposed question topic areas were covered in all interviews. The sample interview questions were drafted based on the current literature and research on school choice and equity. Specifically, the literature

reviewed in Chapter Three was used to develop the sample interview questions.

Former and current Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) superintendents, associate superintendents, school board trustees, principals, and central office leaders were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Potential participants were initially invited through an email invitation. A study information letter and consent form were attached to the email invitation. All emails were sent from my University of Alberta email account. If invitees did not respond to the email invitation, a follow-up phone call was initiated with a second invitation to participate.

Twenty-nine of 31 requests for interviews were accepted. When participants responded in the affirmative, a follow-up phone call was initiated to arrange time and answer any questions regarding the study. Participants were advised of the intent of the study and provided with a set of potential questions with the caveat that additional questions could be asked as the interview evolved (Appendix E contains sample interview questions). Participants were advised that the interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants received a transcript of their interview with a timeline for requests to omit, all or part, of their data. There were no requests for significant revisions to transcribed interviews. Two requests requesting grammatical changes were received.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used in the selection of interview participants. Purposeful sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited

resources (Patton, 2002). This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The focus of my research was on the policy process and changes to policies so the interviewees were limited to individuals who played a more active role in the policy process. To ensure that there was both depth and breadth to the information gathered through the interview process, 29 interviews were conducted representing a diverse range of experiences relating to school choice in Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). Specifically, there were representatives from four groups: school board trustees, senior leadership (inclusive of superintendents and associate superintendents), central office leaders, and principals. Table 1 outlines the number of interviews from each category of participants. The total number in Table 1 is higher than the number of interviewees as several participants served in multiple roles during the period of the case study (e.g., principal and trustee, principal and central office leader). A higher number of principal interviews were conducted given the number of potential participants in this category, the role of principals in policy enactment, and the relative impact of school choice policies on school operations and programming. A second level of purposeful sampling occurred in relation to the principal interviews. The principal category included people with varied experiences: principals who had experience leading schools or programs of choice, principals who had experience leading urban schools, principals who had experience leading rural schools, and principals who had experience leading schools with declining enrolment.

Table 1

*Participant Interview Summary*

| Interview Category  | Number of Interviews |
|---|----------------------|
| School Board Trustees   | 7                    |
| Senior Leadership (inclusive of Superintendent and Associate Superintendents) | 7                    |
| Central Leadership (inclusive of Directors and Executive Assistants)          | 9                    |
| Principals  | 18                   |

The relationships between researcher and participants are key ethical concerns in any research endeavour. As noted previously, I was employed by SRSDC and had insider status as a researcher. As an insider, the importance of ethical engagement with participants and fair and ethical use of the data they provided was heightened. Every effort was made to maintain the anonymity of participants. Participants included Superintendents and Associate Superintendents; however, given their small numbers, any quotes used in the analysis and discussion sections reference them as senior leaders. Furthermore, in instances where quotes containing a specific reference (e.g., to a specific school) were used and where the reference was not significant to the meaning of the quote, the specific reference was replaced by a general terms (e.g., School X).

**Case Study Protocol**

The case study protocol is one procedural element that increases the transferability and confirmability of case study research (Yin, 2003). In addition to the procedure outlined below, a case study database was maintained inclusive of all

documents, interview transcripts, personal reflection journal, and case study notes.

### **Procedure**

1. From November 2013 to March 2014, all documents, inclusive of numbers one through eight noted above in sources of evidence, were read thoroughly. Any information relating to school choice (directly or peripherally) was recorded verbatim and sourced in a case study notebook. Leadership changes, funding mechanisms, facility reports, transportation information, and special delegations to the Board were included as peripheral issues.
2. Interviews were conducted following completion of the document review (March through April 2014). The timing of the interviews was intentional as background knowledge assisted with interviewing, particularly relating to the 1995 to 2000 time period.
3. Interviews were transcribed throughout May 2014 and the transcriptions were returned to participants for their review on June 07, 2014. Participants were given 1 month to edit their transcripts or withdraw their data from the study. No significant revisions or withdrawals were received.
4. Analytic coding began on July 08, 2014.
5. The NVIVO software platform was used to code data. The case study notebook and interview transcripts were uploaded to the software platform. The case study notebook was coded first. Interview transcripts were coded in the following order senior leaders, trustees, central office leaders, and principals.

6. The time period of the case study was divided into four phases based on person who held the office of the Superintendent:
  - a. Phase 1 – January 1995 to December 2000
  - b. Phase 2 – January 2001 - December 2005
  - c. Phase 3 – January 2006 - October 2009
  - d. Phase 4 – November 2009 to December 2014

Data were initially coded primarily based on nodes based on the policy cycle (Levin, 2001) for each phase. There were sub-nodes within each node. These nodes were used to provide structure to the data to make it easier for themes to emerge.

- a. School Choice Policy Changes
  - b. Policy Drivers
  - c. Policy Enactment
  - d. Policy Outcomes
  - e. Explicit and Implicit Values
  - f. Tensions
7. Following the initial coding, a second level of data analysis began that based on the characteristics of complex adaptive systems (Table 2).
8. A third level of data analysis included a focus on equity in the school division (Table 3).
9. Writing was a part of data analysis as themes and data shifted in importance from original propositions. Data were re-coded and combined to test various hypotheses and rival explanations.

### **Data Analysis: A Staged Approach**

The data analysis was an inductive and iterative process (Ball et al., 2012; Fallon & Paquette, 2009; Yin, 2003). Similar to complex adaptive systems characteristics, data analysis did not follow a linear and structured path. Data analyses employed the logic of analyses as outlined by Merriam (2014). The initial data analysis was more inductive and focused on discovery of themes and patterns. As data analysis continued, it was both inductive and deductive as discovery of themes and patterns continued and verification began. The final stage of data analysis was more deductive in nature as themes and patterns were tested and confirmed.

**Stage one.** The first decision was to divide the case study into four phases based on the office of the superintendent. Phase narratives were developed for each phase.

- Phase 1 – January 1995 to December 2000
- Phase 2 – January 2001 - December 2005
- Phase 3 – January 2006 - October 2009
- Phase 4 – November 2009 to December 2014

Phase narratives, rich descriptions, were written for each phase. Phase narratives follow a consistent presentation. Recognizing the importance of context, the narratives begin with a general overview of context and a description of the Suburban Rural School Division (SRSDC) strategic education plans for the time period. Context is followed by practice and policy developments in relation to school closures, charter schools, alternative programs, French immersion programs, school-based programs, and choice through boundary exemptions. In other words, *what* choices are available? *How* are they

accessed? *Why* did they emerge or evolve? Finally, the narratives provide descriptions of associated policies relating to marketing and student transportation. These procedural policies focus on the how of choice policies.

**Stage two.** Across phases, evidence of the characteristics of CAS was documented and was categorized based on the heuristic in Table 2 (Ball et al., 2012; Keshavarz et al., 2010; van der Steen et al., 2013).

Table 2

*Complex Adaptive Systems Analytic Codes*

| <b>Phases</b>  | <b>Analytic Codes</b>  |
|--|--|
| Policy Context Understanding<br>the degree of openness/ fuzzy boundaries | Policy history (past policies, legislation)<br>Social and political framework<br>Policy narratives that shaped the policy<br>Agents belief systems   |
| A group of interconnected agents in a network                            | Perspectives and experiences of the policy agents<br>Agents of change and resistance<br>Feedback mechanisms<br>Entrepreneurs, Enthusiasts, Critics, Receivers                                |
| Policy enactment   | Process through which the policy was developed   |
| Adaptive responses and the “rules”                                       | Adaptive responses<br>Agents impacts on the policy enactment<br>Feedback Mechanisms<br>Informal rules / informal networks<br>Tipping points/ Threshold effects<br>What are the key tensions? |
| Information sharing  | Formal communication<br>Informal communication channels  |

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|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Emergent properties | Feedback loops   |
|                     | Unintended consequences                                  |
|                     | Students   |
|                     | Schools (relationships, affect, working conditions)      |
|                     | Society (community and diversity, equity and efficiency) |

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(Ball et al., 2012; Keshavarz et al., 2010; van der Steen et al., 2013)

**Stage three.** Stage three of data analysis focused on the meanings of equity that were implicit or explicit in policies across the phases. An “equity” heuristic (Table 3) considers how to discern the equity implications based on previous research (Ben Jaafar & Anderson, 2007; Bosetti, 2004; Brighouse, 2008; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Musset, 2012; Taylor et al., 1997). Table 3 provided a structure to categorize evidence of equity implicit in policies and practices.

Table 3

*Equity and Policy Characteristics*

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**Equity: Key Questions**

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- What were the stated policy goals?
  - How was policy success evaluated?
  - What were the funding policies?
  - Do social/educational concerns and/or budget technical concerns frame policy problems?
  - What type of language was used to frame policy?
  - What types of choices were available?
  - What were the selection criteria?
  - Were there additional fees?
  - How were families supported in term of access?
  - How were choices promoted?
-

What was the level of competition among schools?  
Who gets to choose?  
Why are certain choice programs available?  
What drives the policy agenda?  
Is public democratic or economic language predominant?  
Are values explicit or implicit?  
What measures are used?  
What criteria are reflected in policy decisions?  
How is equity defined?

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**Stage four.** Writing was a significant part of the analytic process as themes emerged and connections became more or less important. Writing provided insight into the way in which “policy” was done in SRSDC. There was the official policy process but the informal aspects of policy emerged as themes and phases came together. Emerging from the analysis were how policy outcomes from previous phases were framed, then valued, and subsequently shaped shifts in subsequent policies. Interaction effects also emerged across phases. Although this case study is extensive in terms of length and depth, it is *not* intended to present a complete picture of the leaders, the SRSDC organization, and their complexities. The causal mechanisms presented are partial and, in reality, it is unlikely that any study could truly grasp the level of complexity. The data analysis does demonstrate the operation of the characteristics of a complex adaptive system.

It is important to note that there were several key assumptions in the analytic process. There are multiple realities which are based on social constructions. My

research investigated educational leaders' personal experiences and thus *their* realities of the school choice policy approaches. The analysis did not include judgment of the truthfulness of their experience as their experience is their truth. Personal experiences, and differences in experiences, were used to demonstrate the complexity of the policy process. In writing, direct quotes were used as much as possible to honour the experiences of the participants. The quotes were selected to provide an example of the type of responses I received and/or to illuminate a general theme emerging from the analysis. The quotes are not intended to provide a fully representative description of the interviews.

In terms of the implications drawn from this study, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were important (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were four primary methods to address these quality criteria: collections of thick, descriptive data, gathering of data through multiple sources, purposeful sampling of interviewees, and, triangulation of evidence (Merriam, 2014). Transferability is enhanced when rich, thick descriptions are provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as these descriptions provide someone in a receiving context the ability to assess the similarity between them and the study. In my thesis, I have provided rich detail as to the context of the SRSDC school division as well as the policy changes over time. Furthermore, I made frequent use of interviewee quotes. The descriptions and use of quotes provide a comparative frame for the readers' context. Rich descriptions also support the confirmability and dependability of the study. Dependability of the research is also supported through the multiple methods of data collection and triangulation. In addition to the variety of interviewees from multiple

perspectives, evidence collected from documents was compared against interviewees and interviewee accounts were compared against each other and against documents. The triangulation of evidence was particularly helpful in illustrating the complexities of policy intentions and policy outcomes. Furthermore, contradictory perspectives on the policy process and policy enactment are provided to demonstrate the variety of perspectives and the complexities of the policy process. This active engagement with data collection and the presentation of multiple perspectives supports the dependability of the research. Dependability and confirmability are also supported when the researcher is clear about their position, their biases, and their dispositions (Maxwell, 2013). In the introduction of this dissertation, I clearly outlined my value position in relation to this research. My belief that school systems should value and strive toward equity from access, relational, and outcome perspectives undoubtedly shaped both my interest in completing this research and the data analysis. In addition to being forthright regarding my positionality, I also endeavoured to include alternative viewpoints and to make explicit the pragmatic limitations of what is possible from a policy perspective. Finally, throughout the course of the research a reflection journal was maintained. The reflection journal served several purposes. It was the manner in which I engaged in the process of critically reflecting on my role as the researcher and it served as an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in that it is a log that details my thinking and experiences throughout the research process. The journal serves to document the history of my research, how data were collected, reflections on interviews, and how themes emerged and were subsequently questioned and challenged.

### **Assumptions, Strengths, and Limitations**

My research employs a constructivist research paradigm and, as such, has the basic assumptions associated with this paradigm: there are multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge by people active in the research process; I, as researcher, am attempting to understand the complex world of the lived experience from the point of view of those who live it; and my values as a researcher are embedded in the research process (Mertens, 2005; Schwandt, 2000). In my research specifically, I assume that there is value in studying the lived experience of school choice policies as it relates to illuminating meaning and informing the practice of policy-making. Furthermore, an assumption of this research is that the study of the concrete and lived experience of policy may lead to insight into the abstract world of values and policy-making. As noted previously, my research also has several assumptions about the policy process: the policy process is dynamic and complex; analysis should bring together macro-level analysis of education systems with micro-level investigations; education policy is constituted and contested within specific social, economic, and political contexts; education policy includes texts, agents, intentions, and practices which are realized and struggled over in local settings; and education policy responses are constructed in contexts by creative, but constrained, social agents (Ball, 1990; Bowe et al., 1992; Levin, 2001; Taylor et al., 1997).

Case study research provides an opportunity to investigate complex social units, offer insights and illuminate meaning in context, and inform applied fields and practice (Merriam, 2014). A strength of my case study is the length of time over which the case

was investigated. Specifically, the 20-year time frame provided an opportunity to study policy changes in the case over a considerable length of time as well as the opportunity to identify potential insights into the longer-term implications of the educational reforms that were introduced in Alberta in the mid 1990s. A second strength is the amount of empirical data that was analysed. The diversity of documents coupled with the data obtained from interviews results in a very rich description of school choice, equity, and policy enactment. Finally, my research uses a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework in combination with a particular value position, a critical perspective grounded in the principles of a democratic education project. My research, then, has the potential to extend the critiques of neo-liberal educational reforms to examine more explanatory mechanisms in relation to the policy process.

Case study research also has limitations. Generic limitations relate to the limited generalizability of research findings and a bias toward verification (Flyvbjerg, 2011). My case study has limited generalizability; however, the challenges confronted by the school division and its leaders are not unique. I believe through the rich description of the case, practitioners and theorists will find utility for both their practice and theory development. For practitioners, this study provides opportunities to reflect on current practice. For theorists, as noted above, the combination of a CAS framework and a critical perspective provides opportunities to consider tentative explanatory mechanisms relating to policy enactment and offers potential paths of resistance. The second general limitation relates to the tendency of the researcher to confirm their preconceived notions and is one that relates more directly to my research given my insider status. I addressed this limitation

through purposeful sampling and writing. Due to professional relationships, I was aware that at least a selection of participants had positions that were different than mine and I intentionally asked them to participate. As I have a counseling background, I approached interviews in a non-judgmental manner and was cognizant and intentional in valuing the interviewees' positions. Secondly, I was intentional to present different points of view through direct quotes in the dissertation and to present multiple perspectives on similar themes. Although the use of quotes may be, at times, arduous for the reader, I feel it was necessary to mitigate my bias toward verification. A third limitation specific to my research is the sampling of interviewees. I limited my scope to active participants in the policy process (i.e., principals, senior leaders, and trustees). I believe my research would be strengthened with the inclusion of more voices, specifically parents, who were not active participants in policy development but who were undoubtedly differentially impacted by policy enactment. The addition of the voice and experiences of people "outside" policy development would have added another layer of depth to my research.

In summary, my case study research provides a rich description of school choice policy enactment and the equity implications over time. My case study's primary strengths are the potential implications for practice, policy development, and theory development that result from the length of the policy retrospective, the diversity and extent of the empirical data, and the use of CAS with a critical lens. However, the study would have been strengthened through the inclusion of the voices and experiences of people, particularly parents, who have been historically excluded from policy development.

## **Chapter Five: Narratives of Choice by Phase**

The case presentation chapter is primarily descriptive in nature as it is important that readers understand the extent of the policy changes that occurred over the case study time period. My research is an engagement with complexity and detailed descriptions are needed to help the reader to understand this complexity. This chapter is presented in six sections. The first section is a detailed description of the case, Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). In keeping with a Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework's focus on context, section one describes relevant material and political realities in the school division. Section two through five are phase descriptions of school choice policies based on the office of the superintendent presented chronologically. Each section is a descriptive narrative for each of the four policy phases based on the specific time period that the superintendent was in office.

- Policy Phase 1 (January 1995 to December 2000) (Superintendent A)
- Policy Phase 2 (January 2001 to December 2005) (Superintendent B)
- Policy Phase 3 (January 2006 to October 2009) (Superintendent C)
- Policy Phase 4 (November 2009 to December 2014) (Superintendent D)

Each phase narrative is presented in the same format. The narratives begin with a general overview of context and a description of SRSDC's strategic education plans for that time period. The strategic education plans contains the symbolic intentions and goals of the school division. This general information is followed by practice and policy developments in relation to school closures, charter schools, alternative programs, French immersion programs, school-based programs, and choice through boundary exemptions.

Finally, narratives provide descriptions of associated procedural and technical policies relating to marketing and student transportation. Phase narratives conclude with an overall summary of the phase, including alignments of SRSDC policies with the school choice research literature. The phase descriptions are intended to provide a description of the *who*, the *what*, and the *how* of school choice policies in SRSDC which will assist with making connections to the equity implications presented in Chapter six.

### **Section One: Overview of the Local Context of the Suburban Rural School Division Case**

**Demographic information.** A Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) framework highlights the importance of the local context. An overview of the economic and demographic characteristics of the case is needed so readers understand the operational contexts of schools and the division.

Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) is one of the largest school divisions in the province of Alberta. SRSDC was formed in 1995 as part of substantial changes to the funding and provision of provincial public services in Alberta (noted in Chapter three and described in more detail in the upcoming Phase 1 description).

In 1995, the Alberta provincial government reduced the number of school boards in half, moving from 146 to 66 boards. SRSDC represents an amalgamation of a larger, more suburban school division (SC County) and two smaller rural school divisions (LM and MIN counties). There are five distinct geographical regions within SRSDC: urban SC county, rural SC county, the city of FS, LM county, and MIN county. In terms of other education providers, there is a Catholic school system operating schools in SC

county, the city of FS, and MIN county. A current charter school, NHZ School, established in 1995, offers kindergarten through Grade 9 programming for academically gifted students in SC county and leases space from SRSDC. In addition, of note for urban SC county, is its proximity to a large urban area which implemented an open boundary system in 1974 and is seen as a leader in school choice in North America (Holmes, 2008). It is important to note that in order to protect the anonymity of research participants, abbreviation of geographical areas and schools are used throughout the dissertation.

Currently, SRSDC serves approximately 16,600 students from kindergarten to Grade 12 within 42 schools, inclusive of two Hutterite colony schools. Schools range in size from 30 to 1200. There are 17 schools in urban SC county representing 58% of the population. There are seven schools in rural SC county representing 15.5% of the student population and eight schools in the city of FS representing 16% of the student population. Finally, there are six schools in LM county representing 6.0% of the student population and four schools in MIN county representing 4.5% of the student population. SRSDC employs approximately 875 full-time equivalent (FTE) teachers and 500 FTE non-teaching staff.

Demographically, SRSDC is not culturally or ethnically diverse, but it is an economically diverse school division. Three sources of data were used as indicators of cultural and economic diversity: the 2011 National Household Survey, the 2006 Census, and the 1996 Census. The change in methodology in census data collection and National Household Survey data collection presents some challenges but an assumption was made

that these indicators would provide a reasonable representation of differences across the division. In terms of cultural diversity, in 2011, less than 3.5% in SRSDC of the population reported to be a visible minority; and, in 1996, the percentage of reported visible minorities in SRSDC was 2.0%. Furthermore, the percentage of families who only speak English in the home was 96.2% in 2011 and 97.4% in 1996. Appendices B and C show the percentages of visible minorities by geographic region and by school.

In terms of economic data, in 2011, SRSDC had a high average private household income of \$120,602. In 1996, the average private household income was \$61,276. The relative wealth of the households across the school division compared to Alberta has grown during the time period of the case study. In 2011, the SRSDC average household income was 19.6% above the provincial average; in 1996, the SRSDC average household income was 6.1% above the provincial average (Appendices B and C). Furthermore, based on 2011 data, over sixty-five percent of SRSDC households earned over \$60,000 per year with less than 7.5 percent earning less than \$40,000 per year. However, disaggregated data indicate a wide range of household incomes trending toward regional disparity between suburban and rural as well as congregated areas of relative poverty within the suburban areas. In 1996, there was a 46% difference between average household incomes between suburban SC county and LM and MIN counties. In 2011, the difference remains high at a 38% difference. A second indicator of different economic circumstances is the percentage of households earning less than \$40 000. Although these data are not available for 1996, they are available for 2006 and 2011. In 2011, 3.4% of private households in SC County, 11.9% of private households in the city

of FS, and 15.5% of private households in LM and MIN counties earned less than \$40,000 per year. There were greater regional differences in 2006 with 12.9% of private households in SC county, 23.78% of private households in the city of FS, and 42.1% of private households in LM and MIN counties earning less than \$40,000.

Appendix B compares geographic regions and schools in terms of the average household income and the percentage of households earning less than \$40,000 families per year. These comparisons are based on the 2011 National Household Survey and the 2006 census. Appendix C compares schools and regions in relation to the average household income based on 1996 census data.

As a division, SRSDC performs well in terms of Alberta's extensive educational accountability measures. In terms of provincial standardized examinations, as an aggregate SRSDC students typically earn higher levels of achievement at both the acceptable standard and the standard of excellence at Grades 3, 6, and 9 as compared to the provincial results. As an aggregate, SRSDC students are on par with their provincial counterparts in terms of achievement on high school diploma examinations. However, disaggregated data (Appendix D) show differential patterns of student achievement across schools. As provincial accountability measurements use aggregate data, differential patterns of achievement, and inequities can be "masked" when one looks at results at a division level.

Although a correlational analysis was not conducted for my research, a comparison of Appendices B, C, and D demonstrates that the indicators of economic capital for each school trend with the achievement levels of their respective students.

Specifically, higher levels of family income trend with higher levels of student achievement levels and lower levels of family income trend with lower levels of student achievement. These jurisdiction trends align with provincial level findings as a C. D. Howe Institute study notes that, in Alberta, 40–47% of the variation in a school’s average on standardized tests is explained by variations in the school’s socio-economic climate (Johnson, 2010).

**Leadership in the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC).** In terms of school division policies, elected school board trustees and members of the leadership team are key agents in the policy process. In 1995, Alberta introduced a new system of governance with respect to education. Governance of education became the responsibility of publicly elected school board trustees as opposed to having county councillors as part of a Board of Education. This change represented a significant shift as “now the Board could focus entirely on educational matters where before a county council had been split between municipal matters and education matters” (Senior Leader, Interview). The change to elected school board trustees also provided parents with more direct access to elected officials in matters related to the education of their children. The Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) Board of Trustees consists of nine elected trustees: three representing urban SC County, two representing rural SC County, two representing the city of FS, one representing LM County, and one representing MIN county. In terms of political representation, rural areas are a minority on the Board of Trustees.

The Board delegates authority through the Superintendent of Schools. The

Superintendent is the chief executive officer of the Board and the chief education officer of the division. The Superintendent reports directly to the Board of Trustees and is accountable to the Board for the conduct and operation of the school division. SRSDC had four superintendents over the case study time period. The first Superintendent, Superintendent A, held the office from January 1995 to December 2000 and was a career employee with SC County Schools. His successor, Superintendent B, an external candidate, served as Superintendent from January 2001 to December 2005. Superintendent C, also an external candidate, held the position from January 2006 to November 2009. Superintendent, a 35-year employee with SRSDC, began in the position in December 2009 and was Superintendent at the end of this case study (December 2014).

The senior leadership team generally consists of the superintendent and three associate superintendents (the Associate Superintendent of Instructional Services, the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources, and the Associate Superintendent of Financial Services). However, each superintendent had varied approaches to, and membership on, senior leadership advisory committees. Superintendent A's senior team consisted of the senior leadership team and there was consultation with the Principal's Association. Superintendent B expanded the Senior Leadership Team to include principals and added a second consultation committee known as the Superintendent's Council. The Principal's Association was changed to the Leadership Team and was expanded to include central services leaders. Superintendent C eliminated principal representation on the senior leadership team and renamed the Superintendent's Council to

the Administrative Leadership Council (ALC). Both the length and frequency of the ALC meetings were reduced over the tenure of Superintendent C. Superintendent D eliminated the ALC during his tenure. Finally, the SRSDC broader Leadership Team membership remained consistent from Superintendent B through D including the senior leadership team, principals, and central services leaders. The changes in the level of senior leadership consultation are important to understanding the organization culture, the formal and informal rules, the feedback loops, and the policy shifts over the course of the case study.

In summary, SRSDC is a complex organization that covers suburban and rural geographic regions and represents the amalgamation of three school divisions. Although not culturally diverse, there are economic and social differences within the urban areas and between the urban and rural areas. In its 20-year existence, SRSDC has been led by four superintendents with the longest serving superintendent providing 6 years of leadership.

### **Section Two: Phase 1 (September 1995 to December 2000)**

**Year one context.** Policy Phase 1 covers the leadership of the first superintendent of Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) and encompasses the time period from September 1995 to December 2000. Policy Phase 1 was a very active period from a policy perspective as it follows policy development throughout the first 5 years of SRSDC's existence as an organization. SRSDC was adapting to regionalization and the introduction of market mechanisms by the Alberta government. Significant changes occurred during this period: the reduction of choice in a rural area through school closure,

a partnership with a charter school, the addition of a number of alternative programs, the proliferation of school-based programming for high ability students, and the promotion of choice through boundary exemptions.

The education system in Alberta was altered on unprecedented scale in the 1990s (Webber, 1995).

The 1994–95 year was a year of accomplishment and change. With students as our first priority, we have made major progress in restructuring the education system to ensure that it runs more efficiently and effectively for years to come.

(Halvar C. Jonson, Minister of Education, Government of Alberta, 1995)

The education reforms align with the global trends detailed in the literature review section and were part of an overall reform of the provincial public sector. There were numerous symbolic and material policy changes: the establishment of locally elected boards of trustees, the promotion of choice, changes in the roles of parents and principals, significant changes in the funding model, and a reduction in the number of school boards from 141 to 60 through the process of regionalization. The Alberta government's justifications of 1990s education reforms are debated. Some argue that they were based on the need to make Alberta more globally competitive as well as on morally conservative grounds (Harrison & Kachur, 1999). Others state that the evidence suggests that efficiency and cost-cutting were the primary drivers of the reforms (Levin, 2001; Taylor, 2001). Regardless of the policy drivers at the provincial level, the newly SRSDC was facing a changed policy landscape.

As noted in the overview of the case, SRSDC is one of the largest school

divisions in the province of Alberta representing the amalgamation of a largely suburban school division (inclusive of SC county and the city of FS) and two rural school divisions (including LM county and a portion of MIN county). The process of regionalization represents the first example of themes that emerge throughout the analysis—negotiating behind the scenes, strategizing, compromising, managing tensions and controversy, and adapting to provincial political interference.

In the early mid 1990s, it was well known that the provincial government was planning to restructure public services and there was general pressure from the provincial government for school divisions to regionalize. Given this political “reality,” local politicians from SC and LM counties began private negotiations and worked to form a regional identity (Senior Leader, Interview). Despite local negotiations to regionalize SC and LM county school divisions, the end result, as announced by the Minister of Education, was not exactly as designed at the local level. The SRSDC school division also included half of MIN county school division. Despite proactive and strategic efforts, the final composition of SRSDC represented an uneasy union.

As soon as that (*Minister announcement*) occurred the rural school division was very angry and wanted to withdraw, they were not very happy campers. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Reflections on that time suggest that regionalization was not embraced and was seen as a political decision among SC county employees.

I thought that we (*SC County*) were big enough as a system to avoid regionalization and be an entity unto itself. (Trustee, Interview)

The thought that I remember was that we need to amalgamate or the government will do it to us. I said, well we better do this or we could get other things that we don't really want. (Principal, Interview)

Let's make sure we keep most of what we've got by adding a little bit on the edges seemed to be the winning strategy. (Trustee, Interview)

In addition to the perceived provincial pressure to regionalize, there were significant differences in the financial statuses of the three counties. Prior to regionalization, SC County school division was rich in resources due to a large industrial tax base. LM County was relatively well-resourced based on local taxation revenue but MIN County was not. The material differences among the counties and the changes in education funding exacerbated the tensions resulting from the provincially mandated partnership. In addition to regionalization, the Alberta government introduced significant changes to the manner and degree to which school divisions were funded (Peters, 1999): There was a 12.4% reduction in education funding over a 4-year period and a 4% cap on administrative expenditures, revenue collection was centralized and the ability of individual school boards to raise funds through taxation was severely limited, and a per student allocation model combined with some variable block allocations formed the basis of a new funding framework. What did the new funding model mean for SRSDC? SRSDC faced a significant loss in revenue, a \$6.3 million reduction (Board Minutes, January 1995). The purported equity principle and its operation – a redistribution of

centralized funding by the provincial government negatively impacted SRSDC. One could support the principle of greater equity across the province but the reality of a reduction of funding at the local level created many operational challenges.

Taking away the right to collect taxes was fundamental to the province's drive to pool education resources and distribute resources equally . . . While this socialistic approach is acceptable to many what is certainly not very palatable is taking away money from some and giving to others. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, January 1995)

School Boards "technically" had the authority to raise a limited amount of revenue as Section 181 of the *School Act* provided the legislative authority for schools board to levy and collect taxes at the local level. In May 1995, the SRSDC Board of Trustees voted on a motion to hold a plebiscite to raise a special tax levy of 3%. The motion was defeated by a vote of six to two illustrating that technical authority and political reality are often incongruent. Based on the defeated motion, in the spring of 1995, the SRSDC Board faced governance within the prescribed funding model imposed by the province. The impact of the financial changes was significant.

Budget will force us to change the way we do business in many respects and refine our roles, responsibilities, and relationships. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, April 1995)

SRSDC also faced a number of changes to symbolic policies. Rhetorically, educational choice was promoted by the provincial government and supported through the *School Act* sections on charter schools and alternative programs. There were also

shifts in the roles and responsibilities of parents and principals. Section 22 of the *School Act* required the establishment of a school council, essentially a committee of parents who provides advice on school mission, vision, policies, goals, results, and budget. And, finally, in terms of school leadership, Alberta Education encouraged a more decentralized approach to school leadership, planning, and budgeting. Based on a site-based leadership approach, principals were expected to have more autonomy to develop school plans and allocate resources based on local priorities.

Managing the fiscal realities, developing policies, and building an organizational identity were the primary foci of SRSDC in its first few years of operation.

**Strategic education plans.** The Government of Alberta implemented 3-year business plans for both government departments and school divisions as part of the restructuring of public services. The *Alberta Education Business Plan* purportedly provides direction for Alberta school divisions regarding goals, priority initiatives, measures, and strategies. School divisions were, and are, expected to develop goals and strategies that align with provincial goals. Strategic education plans are important to my research as they are the “official” record of the school division’s policy intentions. The initial strategic plans from both Alberta Education and SRSDC evidence foci on choice and efficiency (SRSDC Strategic Education Plan, 1996–1998)

Alberta Education Goal: Provide parents with greater opportunity to select schools and programs of their choice and enable greater parental/community involvement in education.

SRSDC Desired Result: Parents have opportunities to choose schools and

programs for their children within the public education system.

SRSDC Desired Result: SRSDC will be a comprehensive public education system that provides an appropriate number of services, choices, and alternatives.

Strategy: Establish and implement policies and procedures to govern access to schools of choice and Board sponsored programs of choice.

Alberta Education Goal: Achieve increased efficiencies and effectiveness in the education system through restructuring of education.

SRSDC Desired Result: Effectively manage the challenges associated with government restructuring of education.

SRSDC Desired Result: School and school communities, in conjunction with central administration, will work together to accommodate students in an educationally sound, cost effective manner.

SRSDC Desired Result: School attendance boundaries will be designed to be reasonable and create stability.

In Phase 1, the tensions among choice, school boundaries, efficiency, and cost effectiveness played out on multiple policy levels including the reduction of choice in rural areas and the expansion of choice in suburban areas of the division.

**The reduction of choice: School closures.** The school closure process is difficult for all involved and, perhaps because of the overt emotional reactions, clearly demonstrates the tensions among equity, choice, and efficiency. Furthermore, school closure processes operationalize values in a concrete manner and often illuminate decision-making processes.

As noted previously, SRSDC consisted of urban and rural schools and many rural schools had lower enrolment, lower utilizations, and the buildings' infrastructures were aging. The utilization and enrolment challenges in rural schools existed in tension with SRSDC's desired result of promoting choice and offering programs in a cost effective manner. As part of the strategy to meet the challenge associated with educational restructuring and offering cost efficient educational programs, SRSDC embarked on a journey to consolidate programs and close schools in rural areas.

As the public has requested more efficiency in the delivery of education, consolidation of small classes and under-subscribed programs should have reasonable support. (Board Minutes, April 1995, p. 4)

There will be a need to study attendance patterns through the entire region – particularly at the boundaries of the wards in order to create an efficient and effective operation for the regional division. The September 1995 data will be frozen and available for boundary analysis. It is proposed that an overall boundary study be conducted during the 1995–1996 school year. (Board Minutes, August 1995, p. 3)

In the fall of 1995, the Board contracted an external company to complete an overall accommodation study. The *Student Accommodation Study Year 2000* was released in the spring of 1996. The report reviewed school programs, capacities, enrolments and boundaries, and built an accommodation plan that would purportedly maximize educational opportunities and school building utilizations (Board Minutes,

April 1996). The language of economic viability was prevalent in Board minutes.

We need to ensure that the programs of choice are quality, economically viable, and offered in strategic locations within the school division as to be most accessible to the greatest number of students with an interest in a specific program. It is essential that the school division retain its maximum number of resident students and keep the entire system as educationally and economically sound as possible. (Board Minutes, April 1996, p. 10)

In late 1996, the Board established as one of its priority areas to meet the challenges presented by the *Student Accommodation Study Year 2000*. In order to proceed with the consolidation of programs, the Board developed a school closure policy that aligned with the *School Act* and the *Alberta Closure of School Regulation*. The school closure policy was introduced in May 1996, and revised and approved in October 1996 (Board Minutes, October 1996).

*School Closure Policy Statement*

*The Board recognizes that it may need to close all or part of a school, program for operational or financial reasons because of such occurrences as changes in enrolment, demographic changes, or financial constraints.*

Procedurally, the school closure policy included a review of schools that receive an equity of opportunity allocation (also referred to as a small school subsidy). The overall cost per student was included in the school closure analysis. During Phase 1, the Board reviewed three low enrolment rural schools for possible re-location (i.e., closure):

- the junior high program at BRU school, a K–9 school in LM county;

- CHP, a K-6 elementary school in LM county; and
- the junior and senior high program at MUN school, a K–12 school in MIN county.

With the exception of the senior high program at MUN school (which was recommended for closure), senior leadership recommended that the affected schools be allowed to continue to operate for a period of 3 years. However, it was also recommended that the small school subsidy (needed to operate) be reduced by 25% the first year and 50% the second year. It was further recommended that schools accommodate boundary exemptions to the greatest extent possible. This recommendation meant that communities had to increase enrolment to offset subsidy reductions or make changes to programming to reduce expenditures. Board minutes also reflect discussions of the following areas: communities and families, state of rural Alberta, subsidy levels, efficient use of funds, required infrastructure investments, ability to accommodate students in other SRSDC schools, and the need to consider *all* SRSDC students. The Board approved maintaining operations at BRU school for 3 more years with the subsidy to be determined during budget deliberations (Board Minutes, November 1996) and the Board supported the continuation of the elementary program at CHP school (Board Minutes, January 1998).

The closure review of MUN school was more complex. In December 1996, the Board of Trustees passed a motion of its intent to close both the junior and senior high programs at MUN school. In February 1997, a MIN county community delegation presented a proposal to promote and offer business entrepreneurial programming at the

secondary level at MUN school (Board Minutes, February 1997). The Board did not support the proposal and voted to close the junior and senior high programs. The trustees representing the counties of LM and MIN opposed the school closure motion. The MIN county community delegation appealed the Board's decision to close the programs to the Minister of Education but the decision was upheld (Board Minutes, April 10, 1997). Further developments about MUN school will be covered in a subsequent section on charter schools since the community did not accept the Board's or the Minister's decisions.

During the multiple debates on school closures, trustee comments recorded in the Board minutes reflected a rigorous debate. Most notable were the varied positions related to, and the tensions between, equity and efficiency. These tensions are explored in the conclusions chapter.

**The expansion of choice opportunities.** "Choice" options were substantially increased during Phase 1. In accordance with the Strategic Education Plan, increased choice options were operationalized at the local level through five methods: a charter school partnership, alternative programs, division and school-based programs, and the international program. This section outlines key changes in each expansion area.

***Charter schools.*** The charter school and alternative program sections of the *School Act* authorize choice in the public school system. Charter schools are essentially public schools that are not operated by a school board and alternative programs are education programs within a school board that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, or subject-matter or use a particular teaching philosophy. SRSDC's preferred

policy direction was expansion through alternative programs; however, the Board was presented with charter school proposals for partnerships.

As stated previously, Alberta was the first, and remains the only, province in Canada that allows for the establishment of charter schools. Section 32 of the *School Act* provides the regulatory parameters.

*School Act Section 32*

*The Minister may establish a charter school if the Minister is of the opinion that:*

*(a) the school will have significant support from the community in which it is to be located (b) the program to be offered by the school will potentially improve the learning of students as it is measured by the Minister in schools operated by boards that are not charter schools, and (c) the program to be offered by the school is not already being offered by the board of the public school district or division.*

Within the restructured policy environment, SRSDC was challenged with responding to charter school proposals in their local region. In fact, the first charter school proposal, NHZ Charter School, was presented to the SRSDC Board by the SC Society for Gifted Education in February 1995 in the absence of any supporting provincial regulations. The rapidness of the proposal is evidence of the political and social capital of some families in SC County and the changing role of parents in the education system. The NHZ proposal prompted conversations among Board members and senior leadership.

We had a very early intriguing discussion with the formation of NHZ Charter School . . . Charter schools were brand new, they had been created at the same

time as all of these other changes . . . That was the initial place where we had a lot of discussion about public education being comprehensive. Now we've got this new entity in Alberta, are we going to embrace them or not? We did.

Subsequently there were a number of boards that did not embrace charter schools. But we chose to for good intent. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Following the initial proposal in February 1995, there were conversations between SRSDC senior leadership, the Board, and the SC Society for Gifted Education. In Board minutes, it is clear that SRSDC's policy preference was to open an alternative program for children who were gifted and that was the intended long-term Board policy direction.

Administration has a passionate belief in public education. Staff would have preferred a recommendation for an alternative school but the Society was not interested in this. Administration came to the conclusion that the advantages of accepting the Charter outweighed the disadvantages but we look forward to the operation of the Charter School with the aim of having the school become an alternative school in the future. (Board Minutes, May 1995, p. 3)

The partnership with the charter school was approved for a 3-year term in May 1995 by a unanimous vote. The partnership represented the first charter school-host public school board agreement in Canada. The partnership was not universally accepted, particularly by the local executive of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA).

The ATA believes that the formation of charter schools is a step towards the erosion of public education unless specific guidelines set out by the ATA are

followed. . . . the newly appointed charter school in SRSDC does not follow the guidelines and some SRSDC teachers are not pleased. (Local ATA president, Board Minutes, June 1995, p. 6)

The ATA President asked that the board re-evaluate the type of support it provides for the charter school in SC County. In his opinion, if the Board supports the charter school, it is promoting a two-tiered system of education. (Board Minutes, October 1995, p. 9)

In addition to the general ideological concerns from the ATA, Board minutes and other documents reflect several tensions during the initial 3-year charter school partnership: the selection of students and differentiation of programming (Board Minutes, June 1996), the charter school's advertising strategies (Teacher Board Liaison Committee, April 1996), and the lack of compensation associated with the superintendent's work with the charter school (Board Minutes, December 1996).

In January 1999, the SC Society for Gifted Education requested a renewal of the NHZ charter school partnership. The NHZ presentation reflect the "exclusivity" of the charter school as well as "benefit to individual families."

Parents are delighted with the niche we created for their children. Some families moved to SC county from the urban area and even outlying areas so that their children can attend our program. (Board package, January 1998, p. 14)

I have experienced first-hand the desperate need for this type of school in our

community and I am grateful that the charter school legislation was passed to the benefit of my children. (Board package, January 1998, p. 15)

The Board rejected the renewal application citing general concerns with the level of superintendency services required (Board Minutes, May 1998). However, the Minister of Education advised the Society to present a revised proposal to the Board. The revised proposal specified superintendency services and included a commitment that the Society would explore becoming an alternative program. The Board renewed the charter for a 1-year period (Board Minutes, June 1998).

The following year, the Society advised they wanted to retain charter school status and requested a 5-year renewal of the partnership (Board Minutes, February 1999). The Society was not willing to pursue becoming an alternative program within SRSDC and cited facility choice, class size, the principalship, and staffing choices as their primary concerns. The number of motions regarding the application reflected a lack of consensus among the Board of Trustees. A motion to deny the request for partnership was defeated and the matter was referred to administration to investigate conditions that would make the charter renewal application acceptable to SRSDC. Senior leadership returned with the following response.

Alberta Education policy states that charter schools may be established to provide for an innovative or enhanced program to improve learning. The SRSDC administration has significant reservations about the overall philosophical directions of charters schools. . . . A comprehensive public education system is a highly desirable and valued component of any democracy. Public schools are

generally accountable to a local electorate through democratically elected representatives. Charter schools are an anomaly because under current legislation they are accountable only to the provincial electorate and a local society of volunteer members. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, March 1999, p. 10)

The partnership between the NHZ charter school and SRSDC came to an end when the Board rejected the renewal application by a vote of seven to two.

*MUN charter school.* As detailed in a previous section, the SRSDC Board of Trustees approved a motion that closed the junior and senior programs at MUN School in the spring of 1997. In June 1997, the MUN Community Charter Association presented a charter school application to the Board which was defeated by a vote of eight to one. Senior leadership did not support the charter because the charter school would complement the educational services provided in the local system (Board Minutes, June 1997). However, in August 1997, the MUN Community Charter Association received conditional approval from Alberta Education to operate a Grade 1 to 9 school in MIN county effective August 15, 1997. They requested to lease space at the SRSDC MUN school. Despite negative feelings about the process, senior leadership adopted a diplomatic stance and recommended approval of the lease request. The Board approved the request by a vote of five to three. Trustee comments in the Board minutes reflect a heated discussion: trustees questioned the viability of two elementary schools in the community, a trustee noted feeling like a victim of Minister of Education's decision to allow charter schools to operate, and trustees stated that no SRSDC money or other resources (furniture, library, labs, or telephone) should go toward subsidizing the charter

school (Board Minutes, August 1997). The MUN charter school operated for the 1997–1998 school year.

*Other charter school proposals.* SRSDC was presented with another charter school proposal in May 1997. The Board rejected the Cyber High School Education Charter application by a vote of eight to one as SRSDC provided a similar service through the a local E Quest program.

*Alternative programs.* The second provincial policy supporting choice, and more palatable to SRSDC, was the ability to establish alternative programs. Section 21 of the *School Act* outlines the legislative parameters.

*Section 21(1) states that an alternative program means an education program that (a) emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject-matter, or (b) uses a particular teaching philosophy, but that is not a special education program, a program referred to in section 10 or a program of religious education offered by a separate school board.*

There are three additional specifications guiding the operation of alternative programs: The board may offer an alternative program if it determines that there is sufficient demand, the board has the authority to levy a fee to defray all or a portion of any non-instructional costs that are in addition to the costs associated with offering its regular education program, and finally, the board that offers an alternative program shall continue to offer the regular education program to those students whose parents do not enroll them in the alternative program. Based on both the definition and the specifications, alternative programs have the potential to be exclusive in terms of

programming as well as materially based on the amount of fees levied.

The late 1990s was a very active time in terms of SRSDC policy and practice changes relating to alternative programs. SRSDC developed a policy for alternative programs based on a commitment to provide choice within a comprehensive public education system (Elliot, 1998) and the need for a policy process to facilitate applications (Board Minutes, September 1997). The Alternative Program policy was approved in December 1997.

*Alternative Program Policy Statement*

*The Board supports the provision of Alternative Programs within the division as an educational choice for students and parents.*

*Logos alternative program.* Similar to the experience with charter schools, an SC county parent group was ahead of a formal Board policy relating to alternative programs. In March 1997, SRSDC received a letter from a group of SC County residents indicating their intent to bring forward a formal proposal for a Logos Christian Alternative Program. The formal application, from the SC County Logos Society, came in February, 1998. The application proposed a Logos Christian Program for students in Kindergarten to Grade 9 within the regular school setting. In the proposal, the Society noted several factors that influenced the proposal: growing public support for Christian programming in the regular public school system, the need for providing more options for educating their children, and the viability of the program noting 170 provisional registrations (Board Minutes, February 1998). The application was supported by a vote of eight to one with the dissenting trustee noting,

Religious aspect belongs in a private school, not a publicly funded education system. (Trustee Comment, Board Minutes, February 1998, p. 11)

Senior leadership recommended three Logos program locations and noted the three schools “have the most space and minimal renovations are needed” (Board Minutes, February 1998). The Logos program expanded choice options and also addressed declining enrolment at three SRSDC schools.

So the Logos program was placed at WBO, which was declining, and at BWD, which was a huge school that had room. Then at the junior high level it was placed at SWH, which was experiencing depopulation. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Over the next few months, trustee comments in the Board minutes suggest that Logos programming was somewhat polarizing as many parents expressed support and some were against it. Primary concerns brought forward related to the stratification of students based on religious beliefs and the appropriateness of religious instruction in the public school system (Board Minutes, March 1998; Board Minutes, May 1998).

A second development in Logos Christian programming occurred in April 1999. Logos Christian programming was seen as a solution to declining enrolment and underutilization of the rural LM county school, BRU, which had been previously reviewed for junior high program closure. The Logos program was offered for 1 year as parents who did not want Logos began transferring their children to other SRSDC schools. A school principal reflecting on that time,

The school was starting to decline in enrolment and we had to come up with a

way to boost enrolment. Being a young and naïve principal in those days, how do you get more kids? We knew that if we started a Logos program we would get more kids from the rural area, which in hindsight was not a good thing to do. So we started the Logos program, and yes we got the kids from the rural area pulling students from LMT school. What it also did is 99 percent of the school went Logos, and we had like four kids who did go Logos, but we still had to offer regular programming to them. So they ended up going Logos anyway because everybody else did, but after that first year things changed again. (Principal, Interview)

Alternative programs in rural areas were not a solution to the enrolment challenges faced.

*MUN alternative program proposal.* The MUN charter school operated for only 1 year (September 1997 to June 1998) as parents and the community were uncomfortable with the tension created by the competition that evolved between the MUN charter school and the SRSDC MUN elementary school (Board Minutes, June 1998). The MUN charter school principal requested that the charter school transition to an alternative program within SRSDC. Trustees expressed concerns about the viability of the MUN Alternative Program and questioned the balance of honouring parental choice and supporting programs that it feels will provide a sound educational experience for students (Board Minutes, June 1998). The motion to accept the MUN Alternative Program carried by a vote of five to four. The MUN Alternative Program operated for 1 year from September 1998 to June 1999. Operations ceased because of insufficient enrolment.

SRSDC always attempts to offer choices of programs to students. Alternative

programs are successful meeting very specific needs of some students. The community of MUN may be sad about the closure of the program at this time but every opportunity to succeed has been provided by the Board. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, May 1999, p. 24)

*Private schools becoming alternative programs in the public system.* The support for alternative programs within SRSDC is further evidenced by formal agreements with private Christian schools. In June 1998, the SRSDC Board approved SCA, one of Alberta's largest private Christian schools, to join SRSDC as an alternative program. The 1998 proposal was SCA's third attempt to partner with the school division. There were two failed attempts, one in 1980 and 1990. The failed attempts provide insight into context and policy drivers.

Prior to opening as a private school in 1980, the SCA church community received approval from Alberta Education for a pilot program. This pilot was a proposed voucher system whereby the parents could use their education taxes for a Christian school (Merta, 2013). SCA approached the SC County Board of Education but the Board declined the proposed pilot. SCA then opened as a private K–11 school with 347 students. SCA's enrolment doubled throughout the early 1980s. In 1989, the SCA Church Society, again, approached the SC County Board of Education to determine interest in accepting SCA as an alternative school within the county system. Again, the SC Board of Education declined the proposal.

At the time of the first two proposals, the SC County Board of Education received all education taxes regardless of whether or not children attended public schools, so there

were no financial incentives for the SC county to partner with SCA. However, the funding model was not the only factor in the failures to approve the partnership.

I would say, in my opinion, neither the public school system nor the Christian school, at the time were ready. What I mean by that is that I don't think even had we pushed it a little farther, the population of the Christian school at the time would not have felt comfortable with some of the policies of the public school system. The public school system was wary of the Christian school. . . . So there was a bit of on both parties, so that went on for a season of time. (Principal, Interview)

The landscape began to change in the early 1990s, as the private schools' lobbying campaign, "Choices for Children," was successful in gaining increased public funding for private schools. Furthermore, following the restructuring in 1994–1995, additional increases in public funding for private schools was a potential. A *Private School Funding Task Force* was formed to review the matter. Private schools were hoping for increased funding while public school boards were fearful of additional public funding going to private schools.

At the local level, SCA's enrolment reached 726 students in 1995. In 1996, SCA and the newly formed SRSDC started discussions about possible association under the alternative program section of the *School Act*. Talks continued through 1997, and in June 1998, SCA became an alternate program in SRSDC.

The initial SCA proposal to partner as an alternative program focused on the benefits to SCA and the proposal noted several considerations: better service to students

and parents from within the public system, alignment with SCA's long desire to work with the public system in a cooperative way, unanimous support from the SCA church leadership, and parent support providing they are able to preserve the distinctive features of Christian education (Board Minutes, March 1998). A follow-up proposal documented the benefits to SRSDC noting that a new program of choice fits with the philosophy of a comprehensive public education system (Board Minutes, June 1998). Trustees voted in favour of the SCA Alternative Program proposal by a vote of seven to two. Dissenting comments focused on fees, segregation of children, and a fragmented education system (Board Minutes, June 1998).

Formal opposition to SCA becoming an alternative program came from the executive of Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) local council. The concerns were summarized in a letter to the Board chair: lack of consultation with teachers, the potential for other SRSDC schools to be disadvantaged, uneven playing field, and potential negative implications of competition. The ATA advocated for a broader consultation prior to the final decision, noting,

The Board circulates policies, the decision regarding SCA is of much greater significance. (Board Minutes, May 1998, p. 2)

Funding was certainly a significant driver of the partnership between SRSDC and SCA. The decision of the Private School Funding Task Force not to further increase public funding of private schools and the overall per student allocation model increased the appeal for both SCA and SRSDC.

Once the final decision for that [private schools] happened in March of 1998, I

phoned up the SRSDC Superintendent and said, we're ready to go ahead, funding isn't going to happen for the private schools, so let's see what we can do.

(Principal, Interview)

But the atmosphere changed, in the mid 1990s, and again partly connected to the more bodies you've got the more money you get, and SCA arrived, as did other programs. (Trustee, Interview)

Some of the Board members were very instrumental in looking at what would be the benefit to SRSDC for that private school of 700 to join. So we ran all the numbers, we looked at the numbers. We weighed what we would have to share control with as compared to what the system would gain. Basically when we looked at what the system would gain, the four percent administration was enough to support that school, because one school which was pretty easy to add. But it increased our funding significantly, which allowed us to provide more resources to all the schools. So from a central point of view we were able to hire more people in special education. We were able to hire more curriculum – all those types of supports. So that was a huge benefit for the jurisdiction. (Senior Leader, Interview)

There is no doubt that the changes in funding significantly impacted the willingness to partner; however, the policy drivers were more complex than economics. There was a philosophy emerging in SRSDC.

The Board's decision was partly a result of the changes to the *School Act*. But I think the Private Schools Funding Task Force had a lot of do with it. That made us really think about our philosophies. . . . That made us ask ourselves why they didn't want to be part of public education . . . It made us examine what public education should be and how it could serve the children who were not part of it.

(Board Chair, ATA News [Elliot, 1998])

The broad philosophy of a comprehensive public education system was a shared philosophy of the Board and senior leadership.

My philosophical bent, and I obviously had lots of discussions with the Board in this regard, but my belief is that public education should ideally be for everyone. If public education is to be for everyone then it has to have a big tent and I believe has to be receptive to the wishes and wants of groups of people . . . But we're talking about choice so I think there's choice on an individual basis but there's also choices for groups of people. So the Christian alternative program would be a choice that a group of people wanted, essentially parents. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Furthermore, from the perspective of SCA's leadership, the partnership was seen to have both philosophical and material benefits.

We were less interested about being a private school, we were more interested about being a Christian school. So if we could be a Christian school in the public school system we were thrilled . . . So then what was some of our motivation to join the public school system? Some of it was money but not as you think. The

issue was for me personally, and that's why I supported it, was very quickly we were becoming a Christian school for the rich . . . I thought we were pricing ourselves out of the market, so we thought there'd be an advantage to parents. We thought it would be an advantage to the teachers as well because they would get full salary and pension benefits and all the things that went along with that. So it was a win-win for parents and for the teachers . . . And philosophically we felt as though the documents we put together guaranteed that philosophically we would have the freedom and liberty to bring in the Christian philosophy as we wanted. (SCA Leader, Interview)

Other SRSDC principals, and future trustees, had greater reservations about the addition of Christian programs. Frequently cited concerns related to perceived inequities and specifically, the non-instructional fees, and the selection of students.

I remember having conversations about the Christian school. I said, well if we're a public school system then we need to have an even playing field for everybody. If this school comes in and they have their own opportunity to select students, that I fundamentally disagree with. It needs to be even for everybody. If they're going to charge an additional tuition to attend that school, it's even less equal. How can we in all good conscience accept that? (Principal, Interview)

I think it was just the same, there was a bit of a bitterness related to feeling that they already had money, they could charge what we used to think was tuition. Their teachers could teach in our district but we couldn't teach there unless we

had a particular affiliation with a particular church. I don't think we were any happier to get them than we were to regionalize. (Principal, Interview)

I don't know if animosity is maybe too strong a word, regarding the Christian schools as being elitist schools that would take our best kids but certainly then discard students who didn't fit in and would say, well they'll be good enough for the public system. So there was some resentment around that in the early years for sure. (Principal, Interview)

I remember being at the board meeting where SCA was accepted to the district. My personal feelings at that time were very positive towards that happening. I thought it was a good move. There were people that thought, well now they get the best of both worlds. They get to charge a fee and get to choose their own students. They get to have all the grants, teachers get a better salary than they got before. So there were those feelings floating around as well. Personally I thought it was a good thing to do. (Principal, Interview)

SRSDC continued to expand Christian-based alternative programming. FCS Christian School, which formerly operated as an independent Christian School from 1978–2000, joined SRSDC in 2000 (Board Minutes, August 2000). The proposal to partner contained similar themes to the SCA proposal: parent support; benefit to programs; improvements in educational resources, funding, and professional development; and a desire to be viewed as a community partner and not a competitor.

However, there were clear statements regarding preserving the distinguishing factors relative to staff, student conduct, organizational structure, legal matters, fees, and budgeting (Board Minutes, February 2000). In April 2000, senior leadership recommended that the Board of Trustees accept FSC as alternative program in SRSDC noting further expansion of comprehensive education and the precedent and success of Logos and SCA Christian programming. The recommendation included consideration of housing FSC in an SRSDC school. The proposal was supported with one trustee opposed. In December 2000, the co-location feasibility study was presented to the Board.

Internal stakeholders (principals of both schools, facilities, communications, technology, and transportation) approached co-location with sincere interest and honest effort. Stakeholders reviewed space allocation, structure, culture, identity, timetabling, school related activities, and norms. There were sufficient differences in perspectives to suggest that locating FSC in an existing SRSDC facility would be difficult to attain . . . FSC is exclusive both in its form of delivery and absence of external influences on the learning environment. This prescribes conditions on physical accommodation that cannot be met. (Board Minutes, December 2000, p. 5)

The addition of FSC to the SRSDC division did not seem to cause the same level of controversy among other SRSDC principals nor the ATA. The lack of controversy is related to a number of factors: the number of students (approximately 125), this was the second private Christian school to join, and the partnership with SCA was seen as a success.

It didn't really have a big impact on the schools immediately . . . we didn't see an exodus of students to become part of FSC. I think they've inherently grown slowly and are providing a service for their clients and doing a good job.

(Principal, Interview)

The addition of private schools clearly illustrates the complexity of the equity issue. As illustrated in the various quotes, equity was defined by various perspectives/positions. For the administrators and staff at the Christian school, becoming part of the public school increased the equity of access because of the reduction in tuition fees. It also created equitable compensation for their staffs. For other school administrators, the selection of students and the additional permissible fees created inequities between Christian schools and other SRSDC schools.

***French immersion.*** French Immersion language (FI) programming is another choice program in SRSDC. Although the average enrolment in FI represents about five percent of the total student population, evidence suggests that FI was a frequent topic of discussion and debate over the case study time period. In Phase 1, questions around the viability, location, and possible consolidation of FI programs were debated by the Board.

Prior to regionalization, FI programming was offered at two elementary schools and one junior high in urban SC County, one elementary and one junior-senior high school in rural SC County, and in an elementary-junior high school in the city of FS. FI programming was not offered in LM or MIN rural counties. Following regionalization, elementary FI programs in SC County were consolidated and a review of secondary FI was undertaken (Board Minutes, April 1996). Parents in urban and rural SC county

lobbied for senior high FI programming in both the urban and rural areas of SC County (Board Minutes, November 1996).

In January 1997, the FI secondary review report recommended to maintain three junior high FI programs, retain the rural SC county senior high FI program, and add a second FI senior high location in urban SC county. The report noted that the programming recommendations were consistent with parent and student choice, would result in benefits for students, and would strengthen the FI program over the long term (Board Minutes, January, 1997). The official recommendation did not include information on the viability of two senior high locations.

Interviewees involved in FI programming, *vividly* recalled the circumstances regarding the expansion of high school FI programming.

There was a lot of angst over that because how could we possibly support two French immersion high school programs? I think both programs suffered as a result. The BFH one never really gained any great strength. (Senior Leader, Interview)

There was significant pressure on the Board and senior leadership at that time to open a high school French immersion program within urban SC county. Senior leadership looked at the possibility of opening another center for high school. . . . But they were not viable, there was no question they were not viable. After 2 or 3 years they closed the program down in urban SC county because they couldn't run the program. (Senior Leader, Interview)

I know that the pressure from the community forced us to look at it as if it was viable. They forced us to open a program to determine the viability rather than asking the students ahead of time what they wanted. This was parent driven, not student driven. It was clear as we got through that that it was not a good choice.

(Senior Leader, Interview)

Although the viability of two senior high FI programs was questioned by principals from the beginning, the Board began *publicly* asking that question in May 2000 (Board Minutes, May 2000). The rural FI program was in a deficit budget position and the urban FI location was struggling to offer an extensive program (it was phased out in June 2001). Again due to lobbying of urban SC county parents, the Board requested administration to study the feasibility of re-locating the rural senior high program to an urban SC high school. In the end, the Board decided to retain one senior high FI program at the rural SC county high school.

The French immersion program at the high school level, the recommendation I made to the board was that that program be placed at SAL (*urban SC high school*), for a whole bunch of reasons. SAL was depopulating a little bit at the time and I felt that it would be a good program to go there. I felt that most of the students in the program were from urban SC county, and that would be a logical place for it. The politics at the time were such that the federal government, the provincial government, were in a process of decentralization. They were finding places to do things all over the province. The board felt that AJS (*rural SC*

*county high school*) would be the best place for that program . . . It caused significant busing challenges, it caused other challenges. The program did not grow to the extent that I believe it would have in urban SC county; in fact, there were interviews that we did that would support that. (Senior Leader, Interview)

I remember that was a very contentious debate. I think that at the time the reason rural SC county ended up with the high school French immersion program is that we had a couple of parents of French immersion junior high students who were very effective, very eloquent, and were able to make a case. They pushed hard for that. (Senior Leader, Interview)

In the case of FI programming, instrumental rationality and efficiency aims were not the primary bases for decisions. The Board was politically responsive to effective program advocates.

***System and school-based programs of choice.*** In Phase 1, choice in SRSDC was also expanded through system and school-based programs of choice. The Board developed and approved a policy, System Programs of Choice, in January 1996 and established a system incentives fund in the spring of 1996 (Board Minutes, April 1996). This fund supported system and school-based choice initiatives. During the period from January 1995 to December 2000, there was also proliferation of system and school based programs of choice (Table 4).

Table 4

*System and School Based Programs of Choice Expansion in Phase 1*

| Date           | Program  |
|----------------|--|
| January 1997   | E-Quest Online Program                         |
| May 1997       | System Honours Program at CLB                  |
| December 1997  | AJS brought forward a Grade 9 Honours Proposal |
| February 1998  | Approved elementary honours programs at CBN    |
| May 1998       | E Quest discontinued due to low enrolment      |
| March 1999     | FTV Program Differentiation Proposal           |
| May 1999       | Approved program for elementary gifted         |
| May 1999       | Challenge enrichment at RHG                    |
| May 1999       | Fine arts expansion at CBN                     |
| September 1999 | SWH Junior High Academic Excellence            |
| November 2000  | FJH Junior High Honours Program                |

From a policy and practice perspective, these changes are significant both in terms of the pace and type of choice programs. Table 4 illustrates that the majority of changes were occurring at the junior high level (Grades 7 through 9) and typically choice programs were developed to appeal to families and students who were more academically-inclined.

The first “system program” was the honours program at CLB Junior High School. Declining enrolment at CLB was the initial policy driver at the school level.

As I got thinking about this whole thing, the honours program really started to drive. It was my first year and the principal previous to me had this idea, because enrolment was declining, that we needed something that was going to capture kids. Some of the students were actually going across the border into Division X

Public. How could we attract kids to come to CLB? That was the big factor where it started. We did a proposal, we went to the Board, and we had permission to be the System Honours program. We drew students from other areas of the system, some kids would ride on the bus an hour. Eventually as it came out, we drew kids from north Urban Area X, we drew kids from east Urban Area X.

(Principal, Interview)

At the division-level there were additional drivers for the system honours program including financial constraints and the competition with the NHZ charter school for gifted children.

We'd lost all this money and therefore couldn't offer programming for gifted children . . . So therefore we cut all those programs out. Then the NHZ charter school arose and made everybody upset. Therefore the reaction was to the charter and then everyone had a reaction to the reaction. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The Board unanimously approved the CLB honour program proposal for several reasons: the program aligned with the goal of providing greater programming choices; the program provided an opportunity to address the needs and interests of students, the program provided leadership and assistance with the extension of opportunities and support for gifted and talented students across the system; the program met parental requests; and the program addressed market pressures from, and potential loss of students to, private and other operators (Board Minutes, May 1997). The introduction of the CLB honours program created a range of intended and unintended consequences, including concerns about fairness of process and trust among SRSDC principals. There was clear

evidence of the informal feedback loops discussing the CLB honours program.

FRH was a new school, CLB was losing kids, and the principal didn't want to lose so many kids. I don't know whose idea it was, but it was done completely underhanded in the shadows. It was all done, signed, sealed, and delivered by the time it was announced. (Principal, Interview)

I got a phone call from a friend of mine who taught at CLB. She said to me, we're not supposed to tell you this but we're getting an honours program in our school, but we've been asked to keep it hush hush . . . There was a group of them who had it all sewn up. Then it was announced that they were getting this honours program and there was going to be transportation. The next secondary principal's meeting had a bit of rock and roll to it because we were all upset. (Principal, Interview)

There was quite a controversy over the academic program at CLB, the honours program that had certain requirements. It was all built in by the school and it caused some internal issues. It also caused some animosity about what you had for honours programs. People were shopping around for that sort of thing. (Principal, Interview)

What resulted from these feelings of controversy, tension, and concern? The most obvious was heightening of competition and the proliferation of school-based programs tailored to retain and/or attract higher ability students at the junior high level. The CLB

honours program was a tipping point and created a threshold effect.

CLB started an honours program which started taking some of the higher level students. So you get into a situation where you have no choice and you do need to start doing things differently. Maintaining is one thing but once you start losing students you have to address it. (Principal, Interview)

You defeat losing FJH children to CLB by offering exactly the same thing or maybe you can upgrade it. But whatever you do, you meet the competition head on, even if it's intra divisional competition. (Senior Leader, Interview)

FRH was in the new area, everybody wanted to come because it was new, but then the honours piece existed so were looking at this population emigration of high level kids. We had 700 plus kids in a school built for 600 plus, so we still had lots of kids, but we were losing those at the top . . . then we started getting PAT results and seeing that CLB had really high PAT results and we didn't . . . So we were being questioned, why don't you have all this honours going on? So we said, well I guess we have to fight back. So we said, let's create an honours program. I said, well but then we're really not making an equal playing field if we do that, we're creating an elitist program for elite people. (Principal, Interview)

A clever administrator creates a program that attracts kids so they have funding

for their building. Another administrator sees those kids leaving and has to figure out, well what can I do to keep those kids in my school? I'll just use the CLB honours program. CLB honours program was sucking kids up from the other schools because parents think, hey there's an honours label, my kid's really good, rather than leaving the student in the city of FS to the benefit of that student and his peers from having this smart guy sitting beside me in school. They're gone, the money's gone, so the FJH principal then says, well I'm going to create an honours program to keep those kids. They stay, a good chunk of them stay, but unfortunately you have this artificial competition based on not educational need, although there's educational benefits, but it's back to dollars. (Trustee, Interview)

The competition for academic students was not limited to junior high. A similar competition between International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) emerged at the senior high level.

Well IB was another system program, was located in SAL and kept there as a viable program. Then AP came along, and AP was touted as an alternate choice for academically fine students. I think they had some at ARD but definitely BFH had it and I'm not sure if FHS had it. But it attracted the same student that you were looking to attract to IB, so there were tensions over that. Then the teachers got into technicalities, well AP is better or IB is better and that sort of thing. So AP being a school program and IB being a system based program with a lot of international support for it, you get that butting of heads, why are you allowing this to do something that's detrimental to a system program? (Principal,

Interview)

You're doing this so we're doing this, we're going to create this. For example way back when IB was brought into one high school, the other high school responded with advanced placement. Would we have done advanced placement anyway? Maybe, maybe not. (Principal, Interview)

Although competition and loss of enrolment were also concerns at the elementary level, there were only minimal changes to programming in Phase 1. One school in urban SC county which was situated in an older neighbourhood and facing declines in enrolment looked at diversifying their programming.

The numbers were declining in the English program because the community was getting older. So they said, let's make this a fine arts school. I think there was this keyboarding. At one time I think there were violin lessons. Lots of those programs were taught not by teachers, they were taught by musicians or other people coming into the school. But that whole attempt was to grab the audience. (Principal, Interview)

Based on emerging school-based programming, there is evidence of a CAS as competition effects are non-linear. Equity is also starting to be defined at the school level based on enrolment and an equitable share of the market.

*Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.* Rhetorically, Alberta Education actively promotes choice; however, there are discrepancies between the choice rhetoric and policies governing school operations. Specifically, Section 45 of the *School*

*Act*, authorizes limits to choice, particularly for parents who “choose” a public/separate school board. Section 45 (1) establishes a board’s authority to designate its resident students to attend a particular school operated by the board. Furthermore, section 45 (3) sets the parameters for enrolment of non-residents to a particular school requested by the parent. The granting of the request is dependent on whether, in the opinion of the board asked to enroll the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student.

Within the legislative and rhetorical framework, school boards need to find a balance between offering choice, managing enrolments at schools, and ensuring that *all* students have a place to go to school. SRSDC approved an attendance area policy in June 1995.

*Attendance Area Policy*

*Resident students are designated to attend schools in attendance areas set by the jurisdiction.*

The policy included guidelines that provided opportunities for choice within the attendance area/designated school system. Provisions for students to attend a school outside of their designated school used the language of section 45 of the *School Act*.

*Attendance Area Policy*

*Resident students may register in schools other than their designated school providing there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student.*

There were technical components governing requests to attend a non-designated

school (boundary exemption). Parents/students were required to submit a Request to Change Schools form to the principal of the requested school (school of choice) between January 1 and April 30. Parents assumed responsibility for transportation to attend a school other than the designated school (but may be available through the Board). Finally, principals annually reviewed school choice requests. The principal of the school of choice decided whether to grant or deny boundary exemption requests based on *their* interpretation of whether they had the resources and facilities to accommodate the request.

During Phase 1, the number of boundary exemptions was reported in the Annual Education Results Report (AERR). The number of boundary exemptions in 1995–1996 was 197 and that number increased to 581 in 1997–1998. Despite promoting choice through boundary exemptions, Board minutes throughout Phase 1 suggest tensions around boundary exemptions: parents’ awareness of the boundary exemption process (May 1996), overcrowding resulting from boundary exemptions (November 1997), parents’ anxiety (January 1998), the need for a study and review of boundary exemptions as part of the 1999 Accommodation Study (April 1999), and the impact on student transportation (January, 1999).

A second area of the attendance area policy involved the determination of school boundaries. The attendance area policy included a requirement to consult with the public prior to changes to school boundaries. Throughout Phase 1, the Board and senior leadership expended considerable time and effort reviewing and revising school boundaries (Student Accommodation Study 2000, March 1996; Student Accommodation

Study, April, 1999). The Strategic Education Plan (1996–1999) identified the following as a desired result.

*School attendance boundaries will be designed to be reasonable and create stability. (Strategic Plan 1996–1999)*

However, Board decisions on school boundary changes were often deferred and revised as they tried to find a balance between parental choice and enrolment stability at the school level. Given the number of boundary changes that were considered or made during Phase 1, it is not feasible to review each in detail. However, generally speaking, the possibility of boundary changes often prompted parental advocacy to either remain at, or be designated to, a preferred/desired school. Furthermore, the Board was typically responsive to parent advocacy, which often conflicted with efficient operations (dual high school designation to high school [Board Minutes, September 1997], maximizing grandfathering options [Board Minutes, May 1999], and maintaining transportation to honour parental choice when boundaries were changed [Board Minutes, April 2000]).

***Academy of International Services.*** The SRSDC 1995–1998 Strategic Education Plan included a strategy to develop and implement a plan to consider creative revenue generation options. The Academy of International Services program, one such option, was proposed as a pilot project in April 1997. Under this program, SRSDC would provide education services to international students on a fee for service basis. Official Board documents and trustee comments reference benefits to SRSDC students as well as the opportunity to make positive contributions to the global field of education (Board Minutes, May 1997; COSC 2005). However, senior leaders, including the

Superintendent and the Secretary Treasurer, noted that the reason SRSDC proposed the Academy of International Studies was for additional revenue as “the Alberta government did not fund education properly in this province” (Board Minutes, May 1997; Board Minutes, June 1997).

Proposals for the expansion of the Academy of International Services occurred relatively quickly despite low program enrolment:

- 1) Proposal for the International School in Dubai noting the Academy for International Studies is well supported by Alberta Education and Members of the Legislative Assembly (Board Minutes, May 1998).
- 2) Local expansion to include a homestay component although it was not the original intent to assume this responsibility (Board Minutes, June 1999).
- 3) Proposal for Educational Services in China including a China-based SRSDC school to provide instruction using Alberta curriculum and short-term continuing education courses (Board Minutes, December 1999).
- 4) Proposal for Educational Services in Mexico including a plan to partner with Harvest International for location, student recruitment, and tuition/fee management with SRSDC providing staffing and curricular resources (Board Minutes, November 2000).

Despite reservations expressed by some trustees (e.g., lack of internal acceptance, rapid expansion, the need for more information and limited profit margins [Board Minutes, November 2000]), all proposed expansions were approved by a majority of trustees. The Academy of International Services was a contentious issue. At the Board

level, there was a tension between generating revenue and the overall principle of the ventures.

Providing Alberta teachers and Alberta curriculum to Mexican families for a fee of \$1000 is the same as running a private school here in Canada. I don't believe a public school system should be running a private school. We should not be taking money from well to do Mexican parents and using that money to supplement the funding we are not getting from Alberta Education. (Trustee comment, Board Minutes, November 2000, p. 11)

The International Program highlights substantive/symbolic inconsistencies and incoherencies among school choice policy directions. Is there a substantive difference between operating a private school in a foreign country and charging tuition to international students to attend school in SRSDC? Is there a substantive difference between tuition fees for international students and non-instructional fees for alternative programs?

**Marketing and the promotion of schools.**

Time for new beginning with a new division, name, look, and some new staff.

The Board and the staff are up to the new challenge. (Board Chair, Board Minutes, January 1995)

As SRSDC was a newly formed organization, the creation of a regional identity, and building a positive organizational culture were part of the early work. Corporate identity was identified as a desired result in the first Strategic Education Plan in 1995.

SRSDC Desired Result: SRSDC will strengthen its corporate identity.

However, there was a broader role for marketing with an explicit strategy to “develop and implement a system marketing plan designed to maintain our percentage of student enrolment” (Strategic Education Plan, 1995–1998, p. 6). Many questions were raised about marketing during Phase 1. How do you market to parents to meet student needs without causing chaos for the other principals? How do you achieve the appropriate level of marketing of individual schools to the point of maintaining student enrolment as opposed to recruiting with the intent of increasing enrolment? How do you reach the primary target audience for marketing with a system marketing package? (Strategic Review November, 1996, p. 13). Despite the questions, material, and human resources were allocated to marketing efforts. The marketing plan included monitoring of SRSDC’s visual identity, distributing information packages to new residents and potential students, opening of an SRSDC general merchandise store, distributing promotional pins and coffee mugs, and developing posters, brochures and advertisements (Strategic Review, May, 1998). In 1999, SRSDC introduced a new corporate motto, “The right answer” meaning SRSDC is the right answer.

The new corporate identity, “The Right Answer,” with the student with their hand in the air is positive, exciting, and identifiable and it puts SRSDC in the competitive marketplace. (Board Minutes, February 1999, p. 2)

Corporate identity, competition, the marketplace, revenue, choice, equity, and efficiency were all part of the narrative in Phase 1.

**Student transportation.** School boards receive funding from the provincial government to provide student transportation. Alberta Education has very specific

criteria that determine eligibility for transportation funding. Funding is only provided for students who live more than 2.4 kilometres from their designated school. However, SRSDC provided busing services beyond what was mandated or expected by the provincial government. Specifically, although SRSDC stated that transportation to a school of choice was a parent's responsibility, it was common practice to accommodate school of choice students providing there was an existing bus route. Furthermore, SRSDC only levied a fee (pay-ride fee) when families lived less than 2.4 kilometres from the school their children attended (not necessarily the designated school). SRSDC transportation policies supported accessible choice. However, one of the first logistical consequences of the Board's support for school choice was related to transportation costs and the Board requested a review in early 1998.

The Student Transportation Review report noted that school of choice and boundary exemption policies had the following impacts (Board Minutes, June 1998): The efficiency of the transportation system was negatively impacted because of the limits placed on optimal route planning, the feasibility of direct busing was severely compromised, the bus transfer system was needed to provide greater access to schools and programs of choice without the need for additional buses, and the current levels of busing support for school of choice was resulting in a loss of students from some elementary schools and particularly for the city of FS and rural SC County secondary schools. The review further noted that SRSDC provided above-average level of busing service in terms of supporting school of choice transportation. Specifically, the report noted the Board's statutory obligation in transportation was busing to the designated

school and transportation to a school of choice is fundamentally a parental responsibility. The report recommended a school of choice fee, which would be adjusted as necessary to ensure full cost recovery for the schools of choice busing service. The Board did not adjust service levels or add a school of choice fee during Phase 1.

**Summary: Phase 1.**

The 1994 changes were cataclysmic . . . you (*the Board*) have had the unique responsibility of dispensing earmarked funding, a particularly challenging activity, when all funding is severely restrained. You have maintained a delicate balance between equity and equality and for that you are to be commended. SRSDC has been synonymous with significant revenue generation options.

(Superintendent, Board Minutes, November 2000, p. 18)

After 20 years, it may be difficult to appreciate the degree and impact of the 1994–1995 restructuring of Alberta’s education system; however, the Board documents at that time, rich in detail, paint a picture of the Board of Trustees and senior leadership navigating substantive and material policy changes resulting in an extensive review of educational programming. There is sufficient evidence to state the SRSDC Board of Trustees and senior leadership, although partially driven by reductions in funding, also believed in increased choice opportunities in the public education system.

The senior leadership of the organization accepted the realities of the funding changes, embraced the opportunities presented by the amendments to the *School Act*, and confronted the challenges.

There were significant difficulties but I never focus on difficulties, I always focus

on how we can move forward . . . I did a lot of research around school of choice across North America, and obviously we had an urban school division right next door and they had experienced many of the same challenges with various programs. I guess I fully acknowledge that that can be a difficulty. In education you usually don't have to choose between right and wrong, you usually have to choose between what's more right. In my opinion, it was more right to allow choice programs than to worry about the relationships between schools. (Senior Leader, Interview)

In terms of the policy process, as a new organization, the Board and senior leaders were busy developing and approving policies. Policies were developed by senior leaders, circulated for public feedback, and approved by the Board of Trustees. Formal policy was given significant consideration.

In my opinion, policy defines culture. If you have a philosophical culture that you want to establish, you're going to have to establish it through policy. That means you're going to have to keep the policy current and relevant, otherwise people will just say, well we can do whatever we want. I'm a huge proponent of policy that is broad enough to allow people to work within but that is narrow enough to provide direction. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Board decisions, relating to choice, frequently referred back to the policies as the guiding framework. However, also evident in Phase 1, was that the expansion of choice programming often involved behind the scenes discussions, private negotiations, followed by formal applications/proposals to the Board. The policy process aligns with

descriptions of the messiness of informal negotiations and coalition building associated with policy activity (Colebatch, 2009). Furthermore, policy changes in Phase 1 illustrates the concept of the “policy window” (Kingdon, 1995). The educational restructuring, particularly relating to the funding changes, provided a political opportunity for choice advocates to advance their positions and programs (Kingdon, 1995). The political window was most aptly demonstrated by the partnership with the SCA Christian schools as previous proposals had not been successful. Also in terms of policy processes, time constraints have been highlighted as a limitation of policy-making (Dror, 1986). Several interviewees referenced the pace of change during this time.

I think too much was happening too fast. We always used to hear, if we don't do it then the urban area is going to do it, we're going to lose kids. If we don't do this they're going to go to the Catholic system. There seemed almost to be kind of a hysteria, how do we keep our kids? We have to offer all these programs for kids. We also had different factions on the Board so we had people with new ideas. I just recall hearing right from IB to AP, if we don't do it they're going to go to the neighbouring urban school division. (Principal, Interview)

But there was too much coming at us in those days—this is happening, this is happening, this is happening. I think we just felt that we were being pummeled with all this new stuff. (Principal, Interview)

It may be the case that time constraints and resource restrictions pre-empted more substantive decisions regarding equity and the varied implications of policy directions.

Although there were evidence of philosophical agreement between the Board of Trustees and senior leadership, the same level of agreement was not evident among principals.

Certain policy agents in Phase 1 (inclusive of Senior Leadership, the Board Chair, the principal of CLB, the SCA leadership, and parents representing the Gifted and Logos Societies) could be described as policy entrepreneurs and enthusiasts (Ball et al., 2012). These were agents who personally invested in, and identified with, choice policies ideas (Ball et al., 2012). Furthermore, aligning with previous research (Levin, 2001), Phase 1 also demonstrated how the role of parents was shifting and becoming increasingly important in an education system that introduced school choice. However, also aligning with previous research in this area (Engle, 2000; Scott, 2011, 2013), Phase 1 does not provide evidence of universal empowerment of parents but empowerment of parents with economic, social, and political capital.

Although choice was supported by the Board and senior leadership, some school leaders and the ATA were more tentative and skeptical of the changes with particular concerns relating to the equity among schools. These agents played the role of policy critics (Ball et al., 2012). In Phase 1, the introduction of Christian programming and a system honours program created tensions among leaders. Although criticisms did not result in any policy shift, their voice played a role in raising alternative points of view, raising equity implications at the school level, and challenging that “choice” was inherently good.

Previous research has noted that the introduction of market mechanisms may change local relations in the direction of more competition but this is not automatically

the case (Waslander et al., 2010). In SRSDC, the introduction of the honours programs created more competitive relationships among schools. This finding aligns with previous research that competitive behaviour is essentially a characteristic of a school's relation with its neighbouring schools and that competition may need to exceed a certain threshold in order to bring about an effect (Belfield & Levin, 2002). For junior high principals in SRSDC, the risk of losing high ability students to the system honours programs resulted in a threshold level of competition that facilitated programming changes in other schools. Consistent with previous research, competition was not universally or uniformly distributed across the division rather competition was heightened in the highly concentrated markets in urban areas of SRSDC and particularly at the junior and senior high levels (Belfield & Levin, 2002). The competition threshold and agents who assumed the role of policy receivers emerge as interrelated. The principals of honours programming expansion sites were not necessarily enthusiastic about school choice and they align more with the role of policy receivers (Ball et al., 2012). They sought direction within policy and recognized that changes at their school had to "*be done*" in order to protect the enrolment of their higher ability students.

In urban SC county and the city of FS, there were concerted efforts at the school level to attract and retain motivated parents and students. This programming direction aligns with previous studies showing schools facing competition do attempt to influence the enrolment of students by attracting well educated, wealthy parents (Lubienski, 2006; Lubienski et al., 2009; Van Zanten, 2009).

Other than concerns regarding the reduction and insufficiency of funding, there

was little evidence of “problematizing” the overall introduction of market mechanisms. The strategic plans reference the competitive marketplace and the Board embarked on projects to generate revenue. The values associated with the market (Gewirtz et al., 1995) were evident, particularly in official board documents and the practice of school leaders. Competition among schools within and external to SRSDC, orienting programming to attract motivated parents and programs that are exclusive in nature were all characteristic of Phase 1. Furthermore, the emergence of the International Services Program, was evidence of active engagement with the policy and discourse of education as a private good. However, it is important to note that in Phase 1, choice policies were both market-led and equity-led. Policies were market-led in that most programs that emerged were exclusive in terms of access (belief system, ability to pay additional fees, and/or academic criteria) and appealed to families as consumers. However, other components were more equity-led, choice to attend a school beyond the designated school was accessible to most based on the technical/procedural policies (i.e., no additional busing fees, minimal bureaucratic process to access choice). Like most organizations, policies were developed from mixed and, sometimes contradictory ideological positions (Anderson, 2009).

What is clear was the incredible pace and scope of change? What did the changes mean for SRSDC in Phase 2?

### **Section Three: Phase 2 (January 2001 to December 2005)**

**Year one context.** Phase 2 covers the time period when Superintendent B, an external candidate, held the office of the Superintendent. Tensions among leaders were

beginning to be openly expressed at the end of Phase 1. Decision-making processes and the “costs” of school choice, both material and relational, were sources of conflict. From a material perspective, budget disparities among schools and the costs of transportation were evident. The relationships among principals and the relationships among principals and central services leaders were strained. To understand and address these tensions, the Board commissioned an external consulting firm to complete a review of site-based leadership practices. This report, *Site-Based Leadership Review*, was brought to the Board in November 2000. The report commented on several aspects of leadership and funding: There were inherent difficulties to finding the “right” way to do site-based leadership and decision-making, the allocation of resources was very challenging and would require fine tuning, the site-based leadership system caused schools to be too competitive with each other and there was a loss of a division focus, some schools continued to see an increase in their students and an increase in their budgets, some small schools continued to struggle with their budgets while some larger schools were quite affluent, and some schools could not compete because of their size and location. (Board Minutes, November 2000). It was specifically noted that,

Site-based leadership is a philosophical area that the Board needs to talk about in the future so that it does not end up being a system of schools rather than a school system. The onus is on the Board to see that every student has instruction and programs that fully meet their potential. (Board Minutes, November 2000, p. 10)

Key recommendations from the leadership review included establishing a budget allocation advisory committee, maintaining the current balance of centralized and

decentralized functions, addressing the issue of communication and consultation, and establishing a task force to clearly set out at what level decisions will be made and how accountability will be monitored (Welsh, 2000).

Superintendent B began his tenure with two clear directions from the Board: develop a plan to address the recommendations presented in the *Site-Based Leadership Review* report and address language programs and provide recommendations that would strengthen all language programs across the regional division (Board Minutes, January 2001). In response to the *Site-Based Leadership Review*, several key changes to decision-making structures were implemented (Board Minutes, February 2001): The Executive Team, which previously consisted of the Superintendent and Associate Superintendents, was expanded to include principal representation; a broader consultation committee, the Superintendent's Council, consisting of the Executive Team, principals, assistant principals and central services representatives, was created to advise the Executive Team; and division level advisory standing committees, inclusive of parents and teachers, were formed. Over the next several years, several key initiatives and processes designed to promote more collaborative approaches to decision-making and planning were implemented. Furthermore, in relation to strategic planning, annual 2-day conferences were held and included the leadership group, students, parents, teachers, and business representatives. Superintendent B also held semi-annual focus groups with school staff and students throughout the jurisdiction. Finally, Superintendent B and the three Associate Superintendents annually visited schools to discuss school-level issues with principals. There were clear attempts to establish feedback opportunities for diverse

agents across the school division.

Senior leadership in Phase 2 were strong supports of school choice and site-based leadership.

I'm a very firm believer in programming and choice within programs. (Senior Leader, Interview)

I also pushed people to make a connection between the money and the programming. I don't think you can separate the educational part from the financial part in a school. Budget is a process that allows you to put your money where you want to so you can provide programming for children. It has to be seen that way. (Senior Leader, Interview)

In SRSDC, it is very difficult to untangle school choice, site-based leadership, and funding models. The three policy directions are intertwined as evident in the following quote:

It's the funding model though and site-based leadership that I think has really made people overly passionate about choice. (Principal, Interview)

How did philosophical commitment to choice, a more inclusive and consultative decision-making approach, and Phase 1 material and relational challenges interact to impact approaches to school choice?

**Strategic education plans.** As with Phase 1, analysis of Phase 2 begins with an examination of the strategic education plans. The strategic education plan went through a significant revision in the 2002–2003 school year. The resulting plan included 10 goals

but there was a continued focus on a planned approach to balance choice, equity, and efficiency. To align with provincial government language, desired results statements were changed to outcome statements (SRSDC Strategic Education Plan, 2002–2005).SRSDC Outcomes

- An effective allocation model for centralized and decentralized resources is in place to maximize resources;
- A school district that is creative and proactive in using resources;
- A finely attuned funding allocation model that melds business and educational practices is used to create equity in schools;
- In response to community needs and at no additional cost to the system encourage and support school programs;
- Use of facilities is maximized as a result of a systematic planning program;
- We are providing quality programming to all students by maximizing resources and revenue; and
- SRSDC programs are categorized logically and organized through consistent policies and procedures.

Several strategies were identified to support these outcome areas:

- review and possibly consolidate instructional programs, including second language programs, to achieve efficiency;
- establish a budget allocation review committee to review equity elements including small schools;
- study possible school closures;

- boundary adjustments without grandfathering/sibling clause;
- develop a strategic facility plan based on division and sector enrolment, planning demographics, and facility conditions;
- evaluate the programs in place by completing a market trend study of parent and course choice;
- research ideas for attracting more students;
- implement research based marketing strategies; and
- review the roles fees and programs of choice play in our transportation system.

The performance measures included reduced system and school operating costs, increased overall enrolment, and enrolment growth in choice programming. Finally, the Strategic Education Plan 2002–2005 introduced an organizational credo. The credo was developed by a committee of senior and school leaders and was, at least partially, an effort to address the relational tensions among SRSDC leaders. The credo outlined how SRSDC employees work together:

- Communicate honestly, respectfully, directly and professionally;
- Make and support decisions that reflect collaboration and teamwork; and
- Appreciate and respect the roles and responsibilities of others.

The following sections detail how these various outcomes and strategies were actualized.

**The reduction of choice: School closures.**

It is difficult to balance the needs of the community with finances and also maintain a positive environment for students. It is a huge balancing act. (Trustee

Comment, Board Minutes, February 2002, p. 10)

Maintaining the viability of small schools. Low enrolment necessitates the creation of high-cost small classes at each grade level or the necessity to have combined grades, courses or classes. Low enrolment also limits the ability to offer diverse programming opportunities or choices . . . The relative geographic isolation also makes it difficult to retain teachers and makes it very difficult for these schools to become “magnet” schools for specialized programs of choice that could enhance enrolment, as people tend to resist having their children transported from urban to rural settings. It is a further challenge to consolidate small rural schools because consolidation may mean unreasonable bus ride times for some students. (SRSDC Annual Education Results Report, 2002–2003, p. 54)

The challenge of maintaining viable small schools remained a consideration in SRSDC during Phase 2 and the drive to find operational efficiencies continued. In fact, there was an increased scrutiny of schools’ operating costs. There was a revision to the school closure policy to include an annual review of *all* SRSDC schools. The annual review included a presentation of the operational and instructional cost per student for each school.

We are working on a strategic facilities plan, the enrolment status report no longer focuses on just schools who need equity funding but now examines and discusses enrolment trends for all schools. (Board Minutes, November 2003, p. 6)

I was instrumental in putting in place a review of all schools every year. It always made people nervous. It is still is the right thing to do. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Consideration of small rural school closures remained a key strategy to achieve operational efficiencies. In Phase 2, four rural schools (three in LM county and one in rural SC county) were brought to the Board of Trustees for closure consideration:

- The junior high program at BRU school, first reviewed in 1996, was reviewed again in 2001–2002;
- CHP, a kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary school in LM county, first reviewed in 1997, was reviewed again in 2002–2003;
- MIN, a kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary school in urban SC county, was reviewed in 2002–2003; and
- The remaining kindergarten to Grade 6 elementary program at BRU school was reviewed in 2003–2004.

Recommendations regarding school closures considered several factors: educational programs, operational costs, impact on community and region, student enrolment trends and patterns, transportation routes and costs, long range strategic plans, renovations and capital expenditures required, and other special relevant factors. The extent that financial considerations played a role in the reviews and the decisions was a source of debate and tension. These tensions were evident in Board minutes as well as interviewee reflections of that time.

In operating SRSDC, it is imperative that every opportunity is taken to maximize

the funds allocated and to use these funds for the benefit of *all* SRSDC students.

While finances are not the only reasons for reviewing and closing a school program they do play a major role in identifying some key factors as to the benefit of closure. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, March 2003, p. 6)

Most of the so-called positive gains for the division are strictly monetary.

(Trustee Comment, Board Minutes, March 2003, p. 7)

Many of the other school functions, like community connection cannot be quantified or evaluated on a cost/benefit analysis. (Trustee Comment, Board Minutes, March 2003, p. 8)

It would be unrealistic not to consider finances in this issue . . . We are accused of putting finances over education but they are integral, each to the other . . . Our obligation as trustees is to consider the education of *all* children in the district. (Board Chair Comment, Board Minutes, March 2003, p. 8)

That was the thing that everyone said, you're only looking at it from a dollars and cents point of view. That was not true, that was never the case. There are monetary savings but there are also educational savings, and trying to link those together when we made the presentations was very difficult because people didn't want to listen to that. All they said is, all you want is money. It had to have all

the components—educational, transportation, facility, and finances—before it was even looked at as an alternative. If those pieces weren't together, it wasn't even proposed. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The Board supported the recommendations to close both the junior high program at BRU school (Board Minutes, February 2002) and CHP school (Board Minutes, May 2003). The Board defeated the motions to close MIN school (Board Minutes, May 2003) and the elementary program at BRU school (Board Minutes, March 2005).

We are now at a defining moment of moral purpose in SRSDC. This is a point where rhetoric is placed into action. Each of us needs to examine our decision about what is right for children or are we our brother's keepers only when it is convenient and does not cost too much. (Trustee comment, Board Minutes, May 2003, p. 12)

The BRU elementary school closure review represents the last time that a school was recommended for closure. The motion garnered only one vote of support.

BRU was the one that came to mind where when it came to vote only one person supported the closure even though two or three of them constantly agreed with us until they found out they were going to lose the vote and then they changed their vote. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The political willingness to consider school closures was shifting. This shift in politics may be related to the number of school closure reviews undertaken by the Board as well as the political cost of considering closing schools in rural SC county. Parent advocacy for maintaining MIN school, located within SC county, was well-organized and

well-researched. Parents in rural SC county, in comparison to LM and MIN counties, generally had more economic and social capital and were willing to exercise that capacity in support of their small school. Trustee representatives from rural SC county could also easily politically align with their urban SC trustee counterparts.

The school closure process provides insight into the policy process. The policy window (Kingdon, 1995) was reflected in a senior leader's reflection of the process. The reflection demonstrates the principle of "pragmatic possibility" (Kingdon, 1995).

Well you have a limited window for school closures. You don't do them the year of election and you don't do them the year after election or the year before, so basically year 2 is when you did them. That's what we did, year 2 basically and started looking at that . . . nobody wants to be tied to a school closure from a political perspective. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The exploration of school closures are important to my research as they provide evidence as to how the educational marketplace was constructed in different geographic regions across SRSDC. Recent studies (Morgan & Blackmore, 2013) note that education markets are not confined to urban settings and funding and transport policies have reconfigured local markets and intensified the market work undertaken by schools and parents in rural areas. Through both the school closure process and transportation policies, SRSDC was implicitly and explicitly encouraging rural families to attend larger schools outside their communities, particularly in LM and MIN counties. In its first 10 years in operation, SRSDC closed/ partially closed three schools operating in LM county. However, the operational challenges were not addressed through market mechanisms nor

was there the political will to close schools.

**The expansion of choice opportunities.**

*Charter schools.* There was no evidence of new proposed charter school partnerships during Phase 2.

*Alternative programs.* SRSDC established its support for alternatives programs during Phase 1. The Board solidified and strengthened their support of alternative programs in Phase 2. The 2000 policy statement reflects more active support of alternative programs as an educational choice.

In 1997,

*Policy - Alternative Program - To provide for parental choice and to meet specific learning needs, alternative programs may be offered in SRSDC.*

In 2000, the policy was revised to state,

*Policy – Alternative Program - The Board supports the provision of alternative programs within SRSDC as an educational choice for students and parents.*

There were also clarifications about what constituted an alternative program in SRSDC. As of September 2004, the alternative programs consisted of FSC Christian School, SCA Christian Academy, the Logos Christian Program, and the International Baccalaureate program. There were additional policy revisions: The rationale for introducing alternative programs was clarified, the consideration of supporting alternative programs with a financial allocation in exceptional circumstances was approved, and it was established that alternative programs could only be closed with Board approval

(Board Minutes, April 2004).

Phase 2 did not see application for new alternative programs but rather the alternative programs that were “successful” in Phase 1 were expanded. Specifically, there was expansion of urban-based Christian programming.

Based on enrolment trends and growth potential, the Logos Christian program was expanded to include kindergarten through Grade 6 at two urban elementary SC county schools. This change essentially doubled the capacity of the Logos program in kindergarten through Grade 6. This expansion received unanimous Board support in February 2001.

SCA Christian School continued to see enrolment growth and there were resultant pressures on its facility. In May 2004, the Executive Team and the Board unanimously approved an application to Alberta Infrastructure supporting an SCA Partnership School. The proposed partnership was unique in that the SP Alliance church provided a site for the school and provided donated capital to support building the school (Board Minutes, May 2004). This partnership was unusual and outside the “typical” rules governing capital projects.

One of the biggest issues was getting the funding for the elementary school. We worked long and hard to get that, and that was very unusual. It was just at the point when the political scene and the province, people were looking for support for their chance to be premier. So we were able to garner, through the discussions we had with potential candidates, support for that funding. And SRSDC was very strongly supportive of it. So between them saying that and Alberta Infrastructure

and the politics. . . . I went down to the legislature one day to a meeting . . . we're in this meeting and there's about a dozen people in there including some officials from our school society. We were presenting this idea to them and they were mulling it over. Then whoever was in charge of it said, "Well okay you've got yourself a school." (SCA Principal, Interview)

The partnership was an area that caused internal angst with one interviewee.

I was not satisfied with the answers I got to the questions. My biggest concern with that was they were, in fact, jumping the capital queue. That wasn't built just on donations, it was also built with public money. How fair is that? That's definitely one of the places where I feel I did not behave honorably, and it really bothers me. It bothered me then and it bothers me now. (Trustee, Interview)

***French immersion.*** In Phase 1, there were many discussions and debates about the location and overall economic viability of second language programs. Phase 2 began with a motion from the Board of Trustees that directed senior leadership to address language programs and provide recommendations that would strengthen all language programs across the division (Board Minutes, December 2000). A Second Language Review was completed in the 2003–2004 school year and, as noted in the Strategic Education Plan, outcomes included more effective and sustainable second language immersion and bilingual programs and increased enrolment in language programs.

A senior leader shared the recommendations from the Second Language Review at the Committee of School Councils (COSC). There were three recommendations: active marketing, investment and transition support were needed to support French

Immersion (FI) enrolment, a single track FI elementary school in urban SC County should be established, and consolidation of FI programming to the preferred 3-2-1 model with three elementary programs, two junior high programs, and one senior high program should be considered (COSC Minutes, April 2004).

The Phase 2 primary response to the language programming review was focused efforts to increase enrolment in second language programs. Five interviewees, who at some point in their career, were principals of schools with bilingual or immersion programming all indicated they felt direct or indirect pressure to increase enrolment.

So some energies were put into strategies to grow the school, to increase its population, to increase its desirability. Specifically we added a childcare for kindergarten with somebody who would teach them some basic French so that would be a nice tie-in to kindergarten. (Principal, Interview)

I was even coached by the superintendent at the time how to recruit kids, how to get kids from another school. I was told what I needed to do to do that.  
(Principal, Interview)

It's a constant sell and it's not like another school where you don't have to do anything but open the doors. We have to constantly work, being a school of choice. I tell my staff that all the time. We have to work that little bit harder because good isn't good enough, because people can choose to leave us.  
(Principal, Interview)

*The Academy of International Services.* The Academy of International Services program continued to operate in Phase 2. Expansion plans to operate schools in other countries were ceased and the focus shifted to recruiting international students to attend SRSDC schools. There were additional regulatory policies and procedures developed. A Board policy on External Services was developed and approved. The External Services policy provided directions and set parameters around services that went beyond the Board's mandate. It was noted that external services represented an *entrepreneurial* aspect to the organization, enriched the learning experiences of students, and complemented community initiatives (Board Minutes, April 2001).

Similar to the division's strategic plan, the policy on External Services required that the Academy of International Services develop a strategic education plan.

*International Services Business Plan is to achieve and capture opportunities in the most efficient and lucrative manner. (SRSDC International Services Business Plan 2001, p. 1)*

The Academy of International Services remained contentious. The promise of profitability, and thus, additional revenue for SRSDC was questioned by the Board of Trustees (Board Minutes, May 2001), principals (Board Minutes, November 2001), and the Committee of School Councils (COSC, March 2004). In 2004–2005, the International Services program was shut down (COSC, February 2005). A senior leader provided an overall summary to COSC,

International Studies was an entrepreneurial venture through SRSDC External Services. . . In 2002–2003, the decision was made to compensate other

departments for the services they were providing to the program. When the total cost formula was implemented, SRSDC began to see a deficit in the program because expenses were out of line with operating costs. Other issues contributed to the program's downturn including SARS and Mad Cow. SRSDC has suspended student recruitment and has done a great deal of work to improve accounting practices with all outstanding fees now being collected. (COSC Minutes, May 2005, p. 4)

Although global health concerns were noted as reasons for the downturn in the program enrollment, there is no evidence to suggest that health concerns were significant factors. The failure of the program to generate substantial revenues and the lack of local support for the program were the most frequently cited reasons. Interviewees frequently referenced revenue potential as the primary driver for the International Services Program.

We had the International Studies program and we were trying to attract students that way. Looking back now I think there was a big financial impetus to doing that because we had lost that level of funding that we had. (Principal, Interview)

It was promoted as diversity and some good qualities would come from that, but I believe it was a revenue generator, that's why it was done. I don't think they would've done it otherwise. If there wouldn't have been money coming with it, would we have done that? (Senior Leader, Interview)

Well it (the international program) fits into "what can the school system do to

bring in bodies that will bring dollars with them.” You market it and it had some success. Maybe the cynicism of the process eventually reared its head.

(Principal, Interview)

But there was not a strong support at Board level or throughout the division that it was a good idea to bring kids who did not have white skin into SC county that was all white skinned, and be a bit more multicultural. To me it was a classic case that this was a decision based on we can make money. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The International Services program was controversial during its operation and generally speaking, interviewees remained uncomfortable discussing the program in detail. It is an example where there was clear values drift for leaders (Gewirtz et al., 1995). In other words, there was a tension and drift between their ideals as educators and decisions driven by money. This program is a clear example of tension caused when the primary driver of policy and practice was financial gain.

***System and school-based programs of choice.***

There are a number of issues raised that administration will need to deal with - an overall study of space, the number of students, and programming components will need to be dealt with over the long term. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, September 2001, p. 3)

Phase 2 saw continued expansion of school-based programs as well as attempts to bring more procedural clarity through policy revisions. This section outlines the policy

changes followed by an overview of the types of school-based choice expansion.

*Policy clarification.* An outcome identified in the 2002 Strategic Education Plan included a review to ensure that SRSDC programs were categorized logically and organized through consistent policies and procedures. In 2004–2005, a System Program Review (SPR) committee was formed to review concerns and recommend policy changes. The SPR committee, through consultation with principals and parents, identified several concerns: program equity; viability of programs; clarity of differences among programs; system program budget allocations; program approval, implementation, evaluation, and closure; equity of student access; equity in transportation; and consequences of internal competition, including loss of enrolment. The SPR committee recommended changes to policy. The policy name changed from *System Programs of Choice* (2000) to *System Programs* (2004). In addition, the policy statement changed from,

*Policy (2000) - System Programs of Choice - System programs of choice are provided for students to develop specialized skills and meet programming needs.*

to,

*Policy (2004) - System Program - The Board supports the provision of system programs which serve unique educational needs and which are accessible to students from beyond designated school boundaries.*

In addition to the change to the overall policy statement, there were also changes in the procedural components, including definitions and transportation eligibility.

*Policy Definition - A System Program is a course, a series of courses or an educational program which is not an alternative program nor a special education program and which:*

- 1. offers specialized instruction to meet students' needs which may not be met in the regular program,*
- 2. is available to students beyond designated school boundaries, and*
- 3. qualifies for student transportation grants as stipulated in the Funding Manual for School Authorities*

As of September 2004, the System Program classification applied to second language immersion and bilingual programs, the Integrated Occupational Program, and the intermediate and senior courses within fabrication studies, mechanics, cosmetology, and construction technology. Honours programming at CLB and the International Baccalaureate program were removed from the system program “approved” list.

A senior leader, as part of information campaign and in an effort to clarify misconceptions in the community, discussed school choice at the February 2005 Committee of School Councils (COSC) meeting,

SRSDC is seeing a movement towards parental choice in programming. There are societal pressures in addition to legislation encouraging choice . . . A chart was presented illustrating the various types of programs available in SRSDC, ranging from regular and system programs to school-based, alternative, and system special education programs. The chart clearly illustrates transportation criteria, approval to open/close, boundary exemption, direct marketing limits, and

additional allocations for all of the program classifications. (COSC, February 2005, p. 2)

Evident from the policy changes was an interpretation that parental choice was embedded within Section 45 of the *School Act* and there was a community expectation to accommodate choice. The Phase 2 policy changes did not attempt to restrict choice but to manage “choice” through more clearly defined and consistently used rules.

*School based programming.* The majority of school-based programming expansion in Phase 2 involved sports-related options (Table 5). These programs included non-instructional parent fees. Depending on the specific program, the hockey/ soccer options typically cost families over \$1,000 per year in addition to regular school fees. Official reports to the Board, reflects that programming, such as soccer programming, were designed and offered to meet the need of ambitious and dedicated students and compete with the proximate urban Division X region (Board Minutes, June 24, 2004).

Table 5

*System and School-Based Program Choice Expansion in Phase 2*

| <b>Date</b>    | <b>Program</b>      |
|----------------|---------------------|
| February 2001  | RHG Honours Program |
| September 2001 | CLB Hockey program  |
| January 2002   | FTV Hockey Program  |
| August 2002    | RHG Hockey Option   |
| March 2003     | CCH Girl Academy    |
| June 2004      | CLB Soccer Option   |

The expansion of programming, particularly the sports-based programming was, and is,

not universally supported by SRSDC leadership.

I think there were some cases where people didn't like some of the things that were happening. I think when some of the hockey school kinds of things were started up, some people were not all that in favor of those sorts of things. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The primary concerns expressed by interviewees relate to the rationale behind the programs, the educational merits, and the impacts on other schools. The primary driver of programming, in many cases, was perceived to be to attract dedicated students and/or protect enrolment.

I know that in our district during that choice time sometimes we were coming up with ideas that were just to get the students, to get that enrollment up. I think when I was at School X that was one of the prime reasons why I started the hockey program. Our numbers were going down so if we have a hockey option can we keep some of these kids in our community and in our school? I know that CCH for a while had the judo program and they were trying to do the girls' academy. (Principal, Interview)

The only way that other schools could compete in the older parts of SC County was to create a program that could draw people back to the school. So they said, well let's create an honours program, let's get a hockey and soccer program, [and] let's create all these specialized pieces to compete. (Principal, Interview)

The Board was concerned with sustainability and viability of expansion programs

and new programs needed to demonstrate viability before they were approved. The CCH Girls Academy was developed and marketed in both the 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 school years. CCH elementary school was in a rural SC location and its enrolment was declining. In the end, there was insufficient enrolment to offer the program but, in retrospect, the location of the program was questioned.

I know when we were looking at the potential of a girls' school at CCH it got turned down 1 year, and the next year we said you've got until a certain point to get a certain number, and they didn't get it. A girls' school is something that some people want, but to have it out at CCH was probably not a very smart idea in the first place. But the reason it was going to be out there was it was designed as a measure to keep the school open. I think that's one of the wrong reasons for having a program of choice, to boost a population. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The Girls Academy proposal for choice was one that Urban Area X had, so we were trying to compete with Urban Area X even though it's illogical. It was out at CCH, which meant a whole re-routing transfer in getting children out there didn't make any sense. The numbers did not work. It was also looked at a way to boost up the enrolment of a declining school that should've been closed. . . . But no one would make that decision so therefore you supported the declining school, I guess, by trying to come up with alternative programming and choice. (Senior Leader, Interview)

*Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.* SRSDC continued its practice of

designating students to schools within the division but evidence supports an increased focus on attracting students to individual schools, including through the boundary exemption process. Both the expansion of school-based programming options and interviewee comments support an “open boundary” approach in practice. There was increased support and encouragement of overt school choice.

But I think as much as anything what I was trying to push people for was to be open and flexible within the programming that you have in the school. (Senior Leader, Interview)

It was made very clear by senior leadership that it’s wide open, students could go where they want, and competition was encouraged. That’s just the way it was. (Principal, Interview)

Principals, school staffs, and parent communities were focused on increasing enrolment (e.g., WBF held a special parent meeting, looking for a way to make the school more unique and a way to emphasize the school in a special way to facilitate greater enrolment [Board Minutes, December 2001, p. 21], CCH principal and school staff are working on initiatives, such as continuing education and before and after school care that will help increase enrolment at the school [Board Minutes, January 2002]). At the same time, other schools were placing caps on desired program enrolment (e.g., FJH had to place a cap on honours programming enrolment [Board Minutes, June 2002]). Enrolment data also confirmed that the average percentage of students attending non-designated schools increased in Phase 2 (21.2% in 2000 to 25.3% in 2005).

The process to attend a school of choice (non-designated) school the boundary exemption process, did not change significantly during Phase 2. A boundary exemption request was submitted to the principal of the “school of choice,” the decision was made by that principal, and a boundary exemption required annual approval.

**Marketing and the promotion of schools.**

SRSDC is operating in an extremely competitive environment, facing direct competition from the local Catholic school system and indirect competition from Urban Division X Public and Urban Division X Catholic Schools, therefore it is necessary to undertake system advertising to attract and retain students. (Senior Leader, COSC Minutes, March 2004, p. 3)

Marketing remained a focus throughout Phase 2. Similar to school choice policy changes, there were efforts to provide more regulatory overview. The System Program Review Committee recommended a new policy, *School Choice and the Promotion of Schools*. This policy was introduced to complement the revision to the system program and alternative program policies (Board Minutes, December 2004). Furthermore, it was felt that the policy would decrease pressure on, and dissension among, principals (SP News, 2005).

In March 2005, the Board of Trustees approved *School Choice and the Promotion of Schools*.

*Policy - School Choice and the Promotion of Schools: The Board supports the provision of school choice, and the promotion of educational alternatives in order for families to make informed educational decisions.*

The guidelines contained in this policy established regulatory practices related to direct and indirect marketing of schools and school programs. Specifically, the policy stated that communication shall conform to specific SRSDC standards: The principal is responsible for all communication generated from the school, communication is to be expressed in positive terms, and shall not include overt or implied comparisons to other schools. The policy also implemented restrictions on direct marketing. Specifically, direct marketing activities was restricted to current students, students living in the school's designated boundaries, students and parents who request information, members of the congregations of which alternative Christian schools are ministries, students within an alternative program's host school boundaries, and non-resident students.

The *School Choice and the Promotion of Schools* policy prompted local media attention in an article titled, "No student stealing allowed" (SP News, 2005). In the article, an SRSDC senior leader is quoted.

The issue started in 1994, when the provincial government legislated that parents should be able to choose which school their child attends rather than just attending the one nearest their home . . . It really imposed a system of open boundaries. . . Shortly after, there was a proliferation of school of choice, which still continues today . . . although choice is important, it naturally creates a system where some schools will see increasing enrolments and some would see decreasing enrolments. We recognize the importance of choice for families, and we also recognize the value of providing accurate information to parents so they can make the best choices for their children. (Senior Leader, SP News, 2005)

In Phase 2, although system marketing continued, there was an increased emphasis on implementing research-based marketing strategies at individual schools. The increase in promotional activities aligns with previous research noting that principals have been found to engage in more marketing and promotional activities (Ladd & Fiske, 2003). In SRSDC, junior and senior high schools, in particular, put considerable efforts into their school “open houses.” Open houses were used as part of schools’ promotion strategies. They were held annually in the spring and the purpose was to entice parents and families to enroll in the school. Open houses are closely aligned with an open boundary approach. A common concern raised among interviewees was the performance aspect and creating and maintaining an “image.” There were pejorative descriptions of the marketing efforts during Phases 2. The frequent use of “dog and pony show” is suggestive of a staged performance designed to sway or convince students and families to enroll in a school. It was frequently described with a level of disdain to attract students for financial reasons.

For sure, oh for sure the marketing got to be really important. In some respects, we started to lose sight of why we were there. One of the biggest reasons principals wanted the kids is because they didn’t want to cut their staff. . . But yes, we did start to market—nice brochures, nice registration handbooks, new logos, open houses, cookies. (Principal, Interview)

We had open houses, look we’re the best, here’s our scores, and we would be creative with numbers so that we looked better than other schools. It was creating

a system of schools and I really saw that as being a problem at that time.

(Principal, Interview)

There wasn't a lot we could do other than try to bang our drums loudly. A lot of energy went into putting on an open house, a song and dance show about who we are, and how great we are. It was a problem. A lot of energy into the marketing, a lot of money into producing things for people to look at, a lot of time into planning that, a lot of statements that needed to be well phrased so you weren't openly creating a problem with your colleagues. (Principal, Interview)

We'd have to have open houses and we'd have to go rah rah to try and get kids to come, trying to lure families to come to your school. Even advertising in the local newspaper for your open house, things like that, those are dollars and energy that could've been better invested in educating kids. (Principal, Interview)

You had to do a bit of a dog and pony show to make those students realize that this school could offer you all kinds of things. It wasn't necessarily the kinds of information that was really related to this is the best educational experience, but this might be a great time for you and you'll really enjoy this school because we have a good cafeteria, for example. I didn't see the value in that. I didn't see the value in spending a ton of time and money competing for the students. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The dog and pony show descriptions aligns with arguments made by educational theorists that choice and accountability policies have led to fabrications of organizations (Ball, 2000). In competitive systems, school leaders submit to the rigours of performance and the discipline of competition. An image of a school is created that does not reflect the truth of the daily realities of school life and, in fact, truthfulness is not the purpose, the point becomes positioning the school in the marketplace (Ball, 2000).

It is important to note that there was no consensus about school promotion. As with most aspects of my research, the opinions and perspectives of interviewees varied. Furthermore, the opinions and perspectives did not always correlate with the leaders' experiences in preferred or non-preferred schools. Some felt positive about marketing and school promotion noting the importance of celebration, building a positive school culture, providing parents with information, and mitigating parental misperceptions.

Building pride, enthusiasm, and community. Open houses were thought of as competition, that you were out there. You know what? It was. I can remember my staff loved that. When people came to our open house they were blown away, they wanted to come to School X. I guess if you're trying to keep people in their own schools then you don't want them to see what's out there, but I don't think that's necessarily the best way. (Principal, Interview)

So I thought that was important to drum up enthusiasm and excitement about the school. I'm a real believer that this is also important, that positive energy begets positive energy and then you do sort of change the perception. (Principal,

Interview)

Marketing helped to maintain our population, maintain our staffing. And we built that school community on a philosophy that we had, so all the people who joined embraced that philosophy. They were there because they wanted to be there. The kids that left us left us because they felt the other schools offered them something better. (Principal, Interview)

**Student transportation.** Student transportation remained a contentious issue at the Board level. During Phase 2, changes were made to student transportation policies. Specifically, SRSDC sought closer alignment between the transportation funding eligibility defined by Alberta Education and their internal policies and procedures. As noted previously, Alberta Education only provides transportation funding for those students who live more than 2.4 kilometres from their designated school. Initially, in Phase 2, SRSDC continued to provide busing to schools of choice and only levied a fee to those students who lived less than 2.4 kilometres from the school they attended (pay-ride busing fee). However, practice changed in the spring of 2004 when the *School of Choice Transportation* policy was approved. As part of this policy, the Board of Trustees not only approved a 20% increase in the pay-ride busing fees, they introduced a new fee, a School of Choice busing fee. This fee was applicable to any students who attended a non-designated school and used SRSDC transportation services (Board Minutes, March 2004). Under this new policy, parents could be charged both a pay-ride fee and a school of choice fee if their child attended a non-designated school that was less than 2.4

kilometres from their home.

**Summary: Phase 2.** Senior leadership continued to embrace, support, and promote a philosophy of school choice in Phase 2. Specifically, choice was encouraged beyond alternative programs and system programs and schools were encouraged to develop their programming to be responsive to the community. Overt school choice and competition among schools were promoted. Programming developments included an increase in enrolment in Christian-programming and proliferation of sports-based options at the junior high level. Continuing with the trend in Phase 1, the choice programs that were expanded and initiated in Phase 2 were exclusionary in nature (Lubienski, 2006; Lubienski et al., 2009; Van Zanten, 2009). Other than the market theory principle of financial viability, Phase 2 did not present with any well-defined approach to school choice as there were no clearly defined boundaries as to the limits of responsive programming. The limits were defined by viable enrolment in the community.

I always saw my role as one of trying to encourage principals to be creative.

(Senior Leader, Interview)

Similar to concerns noted by previous research on school choice (Bosetti, 2004), the overall goals and objectives of SRSDC school choice schemes were not explicit. In Phase 2, the policy critics (Ball et al., 2012) were driven by varying motivations (belief in the present quality of their educational programming, principled resistance based on their opinions about public education, discomfort with the level of competition, and concerns about inequities among schools). Several interviewees highlighted tensions among school choice and the “true purpose of” and “appropriate programming” for public

education.

I'm not a big fan of the hockey academy, the baseball academy, those have nothing to do with education as I see it. It's something that's important to kids and families but it's not necessarily something that should be provided by public education. (Trustee, Interview)

I don't want to see programming happen where we are compromising math or compromising the basic skills of numeracy and literacy for the sake of hockey or for the sake of band or for the sake of even drama or musical theatre. I don't want to see that happen, and that's sometimes I think where we've gotten away from the literacy and numeracy aspects because we're so focused on building this great basketball academy or whatever it is that you want to call it. So when's enough enough? (Principal, Interview)

Substantively, as noted by McLaughlin (2005) the rise of choice brought questions about the true purpose of public education. In Phase 2, these tensions were raised by the ATA but more and more there were concerns discussed in smaller groups among the leadership group.

In response to the pragmatic considerations (i.e., the cost of transporting students to their schools of choice), choice also became exclusive because of monetary factors. Policy directions were shifting to a more market-led approach. The introduction of busing fees for choice programming likely significantly impacted families' ability to choose as the availability of transportation has been found to be a significant factor for

families from lower SES backgrounds (Bell, 2009; Holme & Richards, 2009). Aligning with previous research (Bosetti, 2004) school choice seemed to be increasingly accessible to the middle class. Although not explicitly stated, choice in Phase 2 was increasingly associated with additional fees. Phase 2 school choice appears to be more market-led as in an equity-led policy environment, concerns about equity of access should have been noted given the ability to choose was increasingly associated with parents' wealth (Brighouse, 2000).

Phase 2 also saw an intensification of school marketing and self-promotion. School personnel spending more time, energy, and money on school promotion and marketing are consistent research findings in multiple geographic contexts (United States [Lubienski, 2006], New Zealand [Wylie, 2006], Chile [Garces, 2009], and the United Kingdom [Bagley, 2006]). In relation to marketing, there was clear evidence of policy enthusiasts, receivers, and critics (Ball et al., 2012).

The strong senior leadership philosophical belief in choice was also tied to a strong commitment to the potential and value of site-based leadership. However, it is reasonable to state that there was differential acceptance of the site-based leadership and school choice programming among SRSDC school principals - some embraced the opportunity, some feared the opportunity, and others resented the implications of the philosophy.

I would suggest that much of SRSDC felt they were special and privileged. Lots of that was legitimate. SRSDC, had previously to it becoming SRSDC, with assessment and everything else, been a lot of money up there. It attracted some

very good people. So I think there was a sense, especially in SC County, that we're pretty good. I think with that there was a sense of maybe a bit of complacency that we're pretty good and just don't rock the boat too much. If you're going to rock the boat over there then I have to rock my boat over here. There was a tension and I was told that by people. (Senior Leader, Interview)

It troubled me over the years that we as principals have not fully embraced the potential of site-based decision-making. It has given us the opportunity to make every school unique to meet the needs of the community and there's almost a fear of doing that. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Throughout Phase 2, there were attempts to bring more regulatory structure to the operation of choice within SRSDC and address some of the principal concerns. Additional clarification and specificity were brought to the classification of programs. Secondly, a policy was also introduced in an effort to manage school promotion. Finally, adjustments were made to the budget allocation model. In terms of the two dimensions of policy-making, political/substantive and technical/procedural, (Howlett et al., 2009) in Phase 2, the focus was on the technical/procedural management of choice. Although there were additional procedural elements, the policies were not intended to limit principals' autonomy.

But I think good leadership, good policy often is about giving up control and allowing a sense of belief in people's ability to make decisions. I don't think good policy is necessarily restrictive, I think it needs to be open to possibility.

(Senior Leader, Interview)

At the end of Phase 2, the substantive issues relating to choice and equity remained unresolved, what did this mean for Phase 3?

#### **Section Four: Phase 3 (January 2006 to November 2009)**

**Year one context.** Phase 3 represents the time period during which Superintendent C, an external candidate, occupied the office of the Superintendent. In preparation for the transition from Superintendent B to Superintendent C, the Board, once again, contracted an external consultant to review division operations. The summary report was not available but as a principal at the time, I have my personal feedback which included concerns regarding being a “system of schools” rather than a “school system” as well as the level of competition that permeated the division. I recall that relationships among principals and central services were strained.

During his first year, Superintendent C implemented new meeting structures and decision-making processes. The Executive Team was reconfigured. The Executive Team membership was reduced and included only the superintendent and associate superintendents. Principal representatives were excluded. The Superintendent’s Council was renamed as the Administrative Leadership Council (ALC) and consisted of a reduced number of school and central office representatives. Over a 3-year period, the frequency and length of ALC meetings decreased from full-day bi-weekly meetings to monthly half-day meetings. Division planning processes shifted from inclusive 2-day annual events, to a division committee consisting of the Board of Trustees with principal and central services representation, and back to a 1 day event for the Leadership group

supplemented by parent and student focus groups. Individual school visits with the Executive Team were eliminated and replaced with small group principal meetings with the Executive Team. Parents were removed from division-level and school administrator interview committees. Based on these structures, there were decreases in collaborative decision-making and a centralization of “power” at the Executive Team level. This shift represents a change in the level of distributed control in the division and was not well-received among many principals.

A review of Board minutes also evidenced changes at the Board of Trustee level. In Phase 3, trustees increasingly discussed Board motions in-camera with public meetings minutes consisting of motions and votes only. Furthermore, the length of public Board meetings also decreased.

Another feature of the organization during this time period was the number of changes in key central services and school leadership positions.

This year we experienced a number of key administration changes – new Superintendent, new Associate Superintendent, 4 of the 11 System Directors changed, 8 new principals, and 13 out of 38 principals are new to their schools.

(Strategic Education Plan, 2007–2010, p. 8)

Leadership changes, particularly at the school level, continued in 2008 and 2009. In addition to the obvious changes in the organizational chart, the number of changes impacted the informal networks in the division.

We used to meet all the time. I would informally get us together and I had a good relationship with other principals. As I said, at one point we kind of agreed that

we really wouldn't take students who were necessarily going to School X. . . But in the middle of all this, and probably one of the most competitive times, the competitiveness was right there with us, people were meeting and talking all the time. . . But as different people came into the buildings, they had different philosophies. (Principal Interview)

What did a new superintendent, changes to decision-making structures, and significant changes in a variety of leadership position mean for choice programming in SRSDC? As with previous phases, the first point of analysis is the Strategic Education Plan.

**Strategic education plans.** The Strategic Education Plan during this period identified “Effective Programming” as one of three priorities. Effective programming was defined as a system-wide strategic approach to division planning and programming. The size and complexity of the school division and a decline in staff satisfaction related to planning and programming were identified as key drivers of this priority (SRSDC Annual Education Results Report, 2005–2006, p. 6). There were several strategies identified to address this priority:

- establishing a division program planning review committee to develop planning criteria including those for small schools and program changes;
- ensuring that the SRSDC system initiatives impact checklist is consistently used;
- communicating program proposals in a timely fashion; and
- managing class sizes through the limitation of boundary exemptions.

The complexity of programming in the school division was further noted in the following year's annual report.

The suburban/rural nature of SRSDC and its proximity to a large urban centre creates challenges as parents in the region come to expect a wide variety of programs. To be competitive, SRSDC must offer similar programs but at a higher cost due to economies of scale. As a result of the school of choice provision in the *School Act*, many rural families attempt to exercise this option of having their children attend large urban schools where increased opportunities exist. This is managed through our boundary exemption policy. (SRSDC Annual Education Results Report, 2006–2007, p. 13)

Perceptions of a lack of program planning and challenges with boundary exemptions were acknowledged as key tensions within the organization. Although there is little evidence of philosophical changes surrounding choice during this period, there were evolutions to choice programming and some procedural changes.

**The reduction of choice: School closures.** There were not any school closure reviews during Phase 3. School status enrolment reports continued to be presented at January Board meetings.

**The expansion of choice opportunities.**

**Charter schools.** There is no evidence of new proposed charter school partnerships in Phase 3. However, in the fall of 2007, the Board received a letter from the Minister of Education requesting that SRSDC develop a specific plan for the temporary accommodation of students from the NHZ Charter school commencing the

2008–2009 school year for the Minister’s consideration (Board Minutes, September 2007). Charter schools and ministerial interference were not new to the Board and tensions were anticipated as evidenced in the following opening comment by the Board Chair,

Comments may be made about this undertaking but please remember that the key thing is that these children are also children of the community and having space for them to attend school is the most important factor. Everyone must remember that students come first and this is being done in the best interests of students.

(Board Minutes, September 2007, p. 2)

Tensions relating to behind the scenes negotiating with the province were also evident.

Charter schools are not something new to SRSDC. . . Before the Board makes decisions there is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes. Sometimes the Board has to make decisions on their own. (Board Minutes, September 2007, p. 3)

When decisions were made the focus was always what is best for the student . . . this Board is not one to make decisions behind the scenes without good reason, it is a very transparent Board. (Board Minutes, September 2007, p. 3)

***Alternative programs.*** The types and number of alternative programs did not change during Phase 3. Similar to Phase 2, the changes in alternative programs continued to be the growth of enrolment in alternative-Christian schools.

As noted in Phase 2, SRSDC submitted a unique Christian-school partnership

capital project to Alberta Infrastructure in 2004. Provincial funding was confirmed and announced in early 2006. The partnership SCA Christian Elementary school opened in the fall of 2007. In that year, the SCA elementary school had a population of 576 students and SCA secondary school had an enrolment of 419, for a total enrolment of 995. By the fall of 2009, the total enrolment for both SCA Christian schools was 1034. SCA's enrolment increased over 40% since the school partnered with SRSDC.

Christian-based programming also expanded in the city of FS. Alberta Infrastructure announced the *Unique United* project in February 2008. This project saw a new addition that would house FSE, a kindergarten through Grade 6 school as well as a modernization that would increase the capacity of FSC Christian school. At the time of the announcement, Fort Christian had grown from an enrolment of 126 in 2000 to 203 in 2008. An enrolment increase of 61%. Co-location with an SRSDC school, perceived as a barrier in 2000, was no longer a significant concern.

***French immersion.*** One recommendation from the 2003–2004 Second Language program review came to fruition during Phase 3. A single track French Immersion school was finalized in the urban SC county area for the 2005–2006 school year. No other changes were made to second language programs.

***System and school-based programs of choice.*** There were some changes to school-based programming in Phase 3 but they are minimal relative to changes in Phases 1 and 2. Honours and sports-based programming continued at the larger junior high schools in urban areas. Although not without controversy, these programs were viable. Despite open tensions among some leaders about educational value, family-incurred

costs, and impacts on other school enrolments, a baseball academy was proposed and advertised during the 2008–2009 school year,

The SP MBA, in partnership with SRSDC, announced this week that School X junior high will be the host school for the brand new academy, which is officially being called “The Baseball Program at School X.” Starting in September 2009, registration will be open to students in Grades 7 to 9 who have a passion for baseball and want to develop their skills year-round. (Frankson, 2009).

There was insufficient interest and confirmed enrolment to proceed with the baseball academy. A principal reflected,

I was approached about a baseball program. I said, well okay. Our numbers were going down and I said, well are we ready to put in a boundary exemption program that is going to say that kids go to the neighborhood school? No I don't think so, we're not going to do that. So when your superintendent . . . says do that, well you put it out there. But I had this icky feeling in the back of my head. So in retrospect I'm glad it didn't happen, because that would've just perpetuated the whole thing. (Principal, Interview)

Finally, in, perhaps, an ironic turn of events, the MUN town and school councils requested approval for expansion of programming at MUN school to include Grades 7 and 8 (the Board had closed the MUN junior and senior high programs in 1998). Local school principals approved the grade expansion and the Secretary Treasurer noted the program expansion would be financially viable. The MUN school grade expansion was approved unanimously (Board Minutes, February 2008).

*Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.* Boundary exemptions were a long-standing and an increasing source of conflict and tension among principals. Phase 3 represents the first time that limitations on boundary exemptions were referenced as an option in the Strategic Education Plan. However, there were minimal indications of focused efforts to address these tensions through significant changes to policy. During Phase 3, there were only minor revisions to the boundary exemption process. The deadline was shifted from April to March to allow for improved planning at the school level. Other procedural components remained the same. A boundary exemption request was submitted to the principal of the “school of choice,” the decision was made by the principal, and a boundary exemption required annual approval.

Enrolment data show that the average enrolment at non-designated schools continued to increase over the course of Phase 3 (Table 6).

Table 6

*Phase 3: Average Enrolment in Non-Designated Schools in Phase 3*

| Date           | Average enrolment at non designated schools |
|----------------|---|
| September 2006 | 25.60%                                      |
| September 2007 | 26.23%                                      |
| September 2008 | 27.15%                                      |
| September 2009 | 26.91%                                      |

In Phase 3, the challenges associated with boundary exemptions were increasingly cited by trustees with specific reference to space and transportation. The urban area of

SRSDC was facing considerable population growth and the addition of modular classrooms was needed at several urban schools. Trustees began questioning whether population growth or boundary exemptions was the primary reason behind the need for modular classrooms (Board Minutes, February 2006). In May 2009, the Board of Trustees requested that boundary exemptions be discussed at a future Education Committee of the Board (Board Minutes, May 2009).

**Marketing and the promotion of schools.** Similar to other areas, there is no significant evidence of changes in policy or practices relating to marketing and promotion during Phase 3. However, the much celebrated tagline for SRSDC, “The Right Answer,” was changed to “Excellence by Choice” in July 2006. This change was made without consultation.

By focusing on *excellence as a matter of choice* we strive to provide opportunities for students to explore possibilities and unique educational experiences.

(Superintendent’s Message, Annual Education Results Report 2005–2006, p. 3)

**Student transportation.** In Phase 3, transportation costs, the need for a transfer site, and long ride times continued to be concerns raised during Board meetings. Despite having introduced a school of choice busing fee in 2004, the cost of transportation remained a concern. In early February 2006, the Board requested a Report for Information about transportation service levels and costs.

The Board received for information the Designated School Report. The report was prepared for the Board to explicitly clarify the charge by Alberta Education that SRSDC provides high levels of transportation services that negatively impact

the transportation budget. Administration, in a response to a Board Notice of Motion, brought forward a study that identifies the effects on the budget should Pay-ride and School of Choice services be eliminated. The conclusion of the report is that the cost of services provided for Pay-ride and School of Choice busing is generally offset by fees for service. Further, the demand for the service from parents and students requires SRSDC to continue offering the service.

(Board Highlights, March 2006, p. 2)

Although the Board advocated for increased transportation funding at the provincial level, the province retained its position that SRSDC busing service levels were too high and an increase in funding did not materialize. Senior leadership continued to recommend, and the Board continued to approve, increases in student transportation fees (Table 7). There were no efforts to adjust service levels although the transportation department continued to work on “route optimization.”

Table 7

*Phase 3: Student Transportation Fees in Phase 3*

| Date | Pay Ride Fee | School of Choice Fee |
|------|--------------|----------------------|
| 2004 | 150          | 125                  |
| 2005 | 175          | 150                  |
| 2006 | 200          | 175                  |
| 2006 | 200          | 175                  |
| 2007 | 200          | 200                  |
| 2008 | 225          | 225                  |
| 2009 | 225          | 225                  |

**Summary: Phase 3.** At the end of Phase 3, SRSDC had been in existence for just over a decade. Certain choice programs including, Christian-based, honours, and some sports programs were solidified and entrenched as part of the fabric of the organization. The trend toward the association between fees and choice continued with transportation fees continuing to increase. Choice was increasingly becoming less accessible for some families (Bell, 2009; Holme & Richards, 2009). Preferred school-based programming and boundary exemptions were resulting in significant differences in school budgets, class sizes, and facility utilizations. Lack of consultation between senior leadership and school leaders was causing friction. Furthermore, the changes in school based leadership disrupted long-standing “informal agreements” and tensions among principals were heightened. Over the 3½ year period, in addition to a person external candidate being named the superintendent, six of the new leadership were external candidates. The degree of external influence was unusual for SRSDC and there was a culture of questioning operational norms. The choice “reality” was being questioned. New principals of schools who had been disadvantaged by competition were openly questioning the fairness of choice policies. The enrolment data demonstrated an increasing percentage of students accessing choice through boundary exemptions. In addition, the limitations of choice as a strategy to improve enrolment was experienced when the expansion of sports programming (i.e., the Baseball Academy) did not garner sufficient enrolment to proceed. During this period, the school choice policy enthusiasts were reduced in number (through retirement and changes in perspective because of new roles) and the policy critics were becoming more vocal. Although senior leadership tried

to have more control over school practices and restrict site-based leadership, similar to research using CAS in other public organizations, leaders felt as if they were “swimming in a flow of events” over which they were unable to exercise as much control as they hoped (Bovaird, 2008).

Despite the concerns with, and consequences of, the open school choice approach as well as a stated goal to have a strategic approach to division planning and programming, the analysis did not reveal any significant formal review of policy or practice. There were not any significant changes in division policy documents during Phase 3. In contrast to Phases 1 and 2, there was neither evidence of an overarching philosophy of choice nor significant consideration of formal policies. However, the organization narrative around choice was beginning to shift. Choice was increasingly being talked about in negative terms among school leaders. What did these challenges mean for Phase 4?

#### **Section Five: Phase 4 (December 2009 to December 2014)**

**Year one context.** Phase 4 represents the time frame in which Superintendent D, a long term employee of SRSDC, held the office of the Superintendent. Phase 4 demonstrates significant changes to the SRSDC policy approach generally, and in the approach to school choice specifically.

In December 2009, Superintendent D was appointed and in January 2010, the Board of Trustees began a review of their governance model including a review of *all* SRSDC policies. The purpose of the review was to clarify the governance role of the Board and the administrative roles of the Superintendent. The policy review process did

not include any public consultation and policies were developed during Board in-camera sessions. In June 2010, the governance review process was complete and a new *Board Policy Handbook* was released to the public. The *Board Policy Handbook* consisted of 19 policies and was supplemented by an Administrative Procedures manual, which stipulated the superintendent's direction on day-to-day operations. The Board Chair described the changes to the Committee of School Councils (COSC).

In January 2010, senior leadership was directed to look at all Board policies. It was found that a number of policies were either outdated, very lengthy, were not in line with legislation, and were not reflective of current practice. The review looked at research on best practice from across the province . . . The Board reaffirmed the new form of governance they wanted to adopt. These are 35–38 school divisions in Alberta who moved to the Roles, Clarification, and Accountability model of governance. The Board moved to 19 policies and approved them on June 30, 2010. The Board retained policies that are required by the *School Act*, as well as policies that outline foundational statements, outline the roles of the Board and the trustees, and others policies they decided not to delegate to the Superintendent. The first 12 policies are the same across the province and the remaining are based on the responsibilities individual boards wanted to keep as their own. (COSC, Minutes February 2011, p. 2)

Most relevant to my research, the Board retained policies on Student Transportation, Program Reduction and School Closures, and Alternative Programs. Attendance areas and boundary exemptions were delegated to the Superintendent. Under

the new model, policies were no longer circulated for feedback.

In terms of decision-making and collaborative structures, Superintendent D, eliminated the Administrative Leadership Council. The Executive Team was, now, the primary decision-making unit without a structure for ongoing and formal collaboration. Similar to Phase 3, there continued to be significant changes in school leadership positions. In 2011–2012, eight principals were new to their positions; in 2012–2013, 13 schools had a new principal (Strategic Education Plan, 2011–2014). Finally, in Phase 4, the Executive Team adopted a leadership placement plan where principals and assistant principals were appointed, rather than interviewed for positions. School administrators were now frequently asked to move schools after a 2- to 3-year period. Although intended to promote the school system philosophy, improve understanding of the school division as a whole and promote professional growth, the change in practice was not universally supported by principals. In relation to complex adaptive systems, attempts to restrict principals' autonomy, both in terms of their school leadership or their career paths, are often not well received. Policies consistently have a counter-narrative among school leaders.

When we did all this principal switching a few years ago, that is how you keep people off kilter. If I think you are going to cause me some grief, I'll just move you somewhere else because you are going to be busy with that. Then you start getting your feet under you and I'll move you again. Then you know what you can maintain control and keep everyone off kilter. (Principal, Interview)

**Strategic education plans.** The Board's priorities in Phase 4 were familiar in

theme from previous years. Equity, efficiency, and programming remained at the forefront; however, there was a reduced emphasis on choice (Board Highlights, September 2010). In the fall of 2010, the priorities were identified (Board Minutes, September 2010):

- Allocation of services with the aim of providing students with equitable access to quality education in all SRSDC schools;
- Alignment of the funding model with base service standards;
- Boundary review with the aim to provide better balance to enrolment numbers, making better use of facilities, and improving transportation;
- and
- Review of French Immersion Programming, including locations and viability.

Board documents, including the Strategic Education Plan, included definitive and intentional messaging about the division being a “school system” rather than a “system of schools.”

The revised 2009–2012 plan intentionally looks at our division as a school system. This shift in philosophy focuses decision-making at all levels on a new guiding principles framework that connect all decisions to our core values and aligns division and school goals. Quality staff and equitable access to resources to *all* our schools are also drivers that are identified as priorities for the division. These priorities along with a decision-making framework based on a system perspective empower staff in every school to provide a quality education to

students. (Senior Leader Message, Revised Strategic Education Plan, 2009–2012 Plan, p. 5)

Furthermore, the importance of translating these belief statements into action was recognized.

The next step is to further articulate our educational philosophies to ensure that they inform and shape our operational and educational practices. The translation of philosophy to practice will be the cornerstone of division and school level efforts over the next several years. The shifts represent a “shared system” responsibility as well as our commitment to equity. (Revised 2009–2012 Three Year Education Plan, p. 12)

The school system concept and equity were initially operationalized through changes in the funding allocation model.

***Funding allocations.*** There was agreement among leadership that SRSDC needed to build a shared understanding of equitable learning opportunities and align the funding model to support that shared understanding. As noted in the Strategic Education Plan, An equity committee will be established in early 2011 with a defined mandate: define what equity means in SRSDC; recommend priorities for system standards services (e.g., counseling time, librarian, administrative time) and resources (technology, wireless access); and develop local performance measures and timelines for implementation. (Revised 2009–2012 Strategic Education Plan, p. 44)

The “equity” committee was established and consisted of central services leaders and

school leaders with the Chief Financial Officer serving as the Committee Chair. The committee was named the Resource Optimization Committee (ROC). Both the appointment of chair and the name emphasized the primacy of the financial aspect of the work. The committee narrowed its original focus from defining equity to determining an allocation model that provided base level services regardless of school size or location.

The ROC recommendations were approved by the Executive Team in October 2011. The new ROC funding model included both fixed and variable allocation components which mitigated some of the challenges associated with the per student allocation model (Board Highlights, November 2011).

Beginning in September 2012, all schools will receive a base allocation that supports a minimum standard for counseling time, secretarial time, library technician support, teaching, and educational assistant support, as well as a minimum allocation for supplies and materials. The new allocation model supports “system” standards for supports and services while ensuring flexibility at the school level by maintaining a variable allocation rate based on student enrolment. The ROC recommendations represent a balance between a system philosophy and school based decision-making. (SRSDC Three-Year Education Plan, 2011–2014, p. 14)

The previous allocation models used in SRSDC also had a redistributive element through the equity of opportunity funding. Previous redistributive models were differentially applied based on the unique circumstances of small schools. The ROC model applied one formula to all schools but increased the amount of money targeted for

redistribution and was, by design, differentially beneficial to smaller schools, and by the nature of the division, rural, elementary schools.

There were additional changes to financial operations that were outside of the mandate of the ROC committee. There were newly *enforced* restrictions on the amount of budget surplus that schools or departments could carry forward. The SRSDC policy on budgeting had previously stated that,

*Schools/departments may carry forward surplus funds of up to 3% of their total operating budget. Leadership staff may make a request with justification to carry forward surplus funds of between 3% and 10% of their budgets. All surplus funds over 10% of budgets shall be returned to SRSDC general surplus. (SRSDC Budgeting Policy, June 2005)*

However, it was common practice throughout Phases 1 through 3, that schools and departments retained their surpluses without explicit consent as long as the surplus was below ten percent of the total operating budget. In Phase 4, the 3% limit was enforced and the Chief Financial Officer assumed direct responsibility for the approval.

*Principals and Site Managers may make a request to the CFO to retain surplus funds above 3% at a time and process specified by the CFO. To be considered, a request shall demonstrate that it shall take multiple fiscal years to save the funds required for a specific purchase. Surplus funds exceeding three per cent that are not designated to a school or department shall be returned to the Division's general reserve. (SRSDC Administrative Procedure, Financial Management, 2014)*

In Phase 4, larger schools, previously able to achieve economies of scale, were increasingly constrained in their ability to incur large school-based reserves and thus this aspect of structural inequity was lessened.

**The reduction of choice: School closures.** There were not any schools brought forward for a formal review for school closure during Phase 4. One school was closed by Ministerial Order due to a power line infrastructure project.

**The expansion of choice opportunities.**

*Charter schools.* There were no new charter school partnerships in Phase 4. NHZ charter school continued to lease space from SRSDC as per the Ministerial request in 2007.

*Alternative programs.* As part of the overall policy review, the Board retained authority over alternative programs. Board Policy 18, Alternative Programs, retained the same language as the previous policy statement,

*Policy 18 – Alternative Programs*

*The Board supports the provision of Alternative programs within the division as an educational choice for students and parents.*

In an interview, a trustee further noted,

Yes, *Alternative Programs* was held as a policy because it is a community reflected value and we are elected to represent the community voice in the direction of public education in our community. I for sure would be one of the trustees that felt very strongly that the Board should hold that policy. (Trustee Interview)

What constituted an alternative program also changed. The list of alternative programs was expanded to include language programs.

*Alternative programs in the Division currently consist of French Immersion, German Bilingual, Ukrainian Bilingual, Alternative Christian, Logos Christian, International Baccalaureate, and Outreach. (SRSDC Alternative Program Policy, 2014)*

These changes parallel the alternative program definition in the *School Act* and eliminated the need for the SRSDC “system programs” classification. Despite the work of the System Program Review during Phase 2, there continued to be a lack of understanding in the community about the distinctions among alternative programs, system programs, and school based programs. Under the new definition scheme, programs were either alternative programs or school programming options. This misunderstanding of choice in the community is evident of the limitations of formal communication in a school division. Choice is constructed in terms of how it is discussed and not simply the formal rules.

Finally, there was an expansion of Advanced Placement to a second senior high school in urban SC county. The AP expansion school had offered International Baccalaureate but this program was high cost and enrolment had decreased in the face of competition from Advanced Placement (AP) at another SC county high school. The school started AP in response to that competitive pressure.

***French immersion.*** French Immersion programming continued to be a system level focus. The Board of Trustees identified a review of French Immersion (FI)

programming as a priority in the fall of 2010.

French immersion – SRSDC recognizes the tensions between offering programming in local communities with having sufficient enrolment to ensure high quality immersion learning opportunities. Declining enrolment and achievement trends have indicated a need for a review of, and investment in, French immersion programming. The review is multifaceted: Achievement and enrolment data will be disaggregated and analyzed at the school level; Several meetings with school administration, staff and parents are planned; as well as a review of research and best practice will be conducted. (SRSDC Strategic Education Plan, 2010–2013, p. 14)

The review was completed during the 2010–2011 school year but it was not as an extensive as initially proposed. The review did not include parent, staff, and community consultations.

SRSDC initiated a review of French immersion programming in September 2010. Following consultation with school leaders, a review of enrolment trends and a fiscal viability analysis, the decision was made to merge the junior high French Immersion programming in city of FS with the junior high program in rural SC County. (SRSDC Strategic Education Plan, 2011–2014, p. 14)

SRSDC French Immersion programming now aligned with the 3-2-1 model recommended in 2004.

*System and school-based programs of choice.* As noted above, this classification

of programs was removed from policy documents as part of the policy review.

*Attendance areas and boundary exemptions.* The more significant changes regarding school choice in Phase 4 were changes to the boundary exemption process. Under the new governance model, attendance areas and boundary exemptions were designated to the superintendent and guided by an administrative procedure. The attendance area and boundary exemption administrative procedures underwent significant changes over the course of Phase 4. There were, in fact, three quite distinct approaches to boundary exemptions over the 4-year period.

*Boundary exemption process (2010–2011).* As noted previously, the Board of Trustees identified boundary exemptions as an issue to be further reviewed in the spring 2009 (Board Minutes, May 2009). Furthermore, senior leadership indicated that boundary exemptions was a contentious discussion item at a meeting of junior high principals in the fall of 2009 (Board Minutes, December 2009). To recommend policy changes, a Boundary Exemption Process Review committee was established to set up a revised process for the 2010–2011 school year. There were tensions that arose during these discussions: level playing field for all schools, viability of all schools, planning and budgeting challenges, recruiting, philosophy of choice, parent entitlement, accepting top students, the importance of individual school identities as opposed to being franchises of SRSDC, and Alberta Education and Board expectations (Meeting Notes, November 2009). A principal recalls that time,

I said, we have to stop this competition, especially the competition that happened where parents could choose up until September 10th to leave the

school. I said, all I want is to know how many kids I have early in the spring so I can budget for that. To budget on thinking that these are x number of kids that are going to be there and then see in September that there's 50 kids less and have to tell teachers they have to leave because we don't have money to pay you, and recreate timetables, was ridiculous. So I said, put some kind of policy in place where principals can know what is going on. (Principal, Interview).

The 2010–2011 boundary exemption process retained the decision-making at the principal level but outlined that school utilization rates must be considered in the decision-making process. This shift represented an attempt to bring a more common interpretation of Section 45 of the *School Act*. The school utilization rates used were the rates determined by Alberta Education formula; however, in many cases this formula did not reflect facility and space realities at the school level. The new process set an earlier deadline and added the expectation that parents discuss the reasons why they wanted to attend another school with the designated school principal. Finally, the new process also included a conscious effort to promote attendance at designated schools. The process was described by a senior leader at the Committee of School Councils (COSC).

It was brought to the leadership group at the beginning of the year that some schools were not following the existing policy regarding boundary exemptions. The leadership group decided to take a look at the policy. School budgets are driven by enrolment. Principals should have the expected number of students by

April to accurately set out their budgets for the upcoming year. SRSDC encourages students to register at their designated schools as staffing, programs, and services are set up based on student enrolment. There is a new process. Parents will inform the designated principal when they want to move to another school (by March 15). The school principal signs the request form (designated principal cannot deny the request) after they have a chance to talk to the parent about why they want their child to attend another school. Parents take the signed form to the school of choice for approval (deadline April 15). The principal makes the decision as to whether or not to allow the boundary exemption. Designated students come first . . . When a school is full (at 85% capacity as defined by Alberta Education) the boundary exemption will not be allowed. (COSC Minutes, March 2010, p. 2)

The attendance area administrative procedure rhetorically supported the new process through its emphasis on designated schools and procedurally supported it through the addition of new expectations (SRSDC Attendance Area Administrative Procedure, 2010).

#### *ATTENDANCE AREAS*

##### *Background*

*All SRSDC schools provide quality educational programming, thus the Division encourages students to attend their designated school. The Division also recognizes that, at times, the specific educational programming needs of the student may require consideration of a*

*boundary exemption.*

*SRSDC is committed to establishing maintaining school attendance areas with boundaries such that the resources, programs, and transportation services of the Division are efficiently utilized for the utmost benefit of all students.*

*Boundary exemption process (2011–2012, 2012–2013).* The 2010–2011 changes to the boundary exemption process did not resolve the tensions and concerns to the extent desired by senior leadership. Furthermore, there were clear differences in philosophies of choice among senior leaders and some principals and there were also internal challenges to the rationale for changes.

We have talked about this at length with people at various levels of acceptance. It is becoming more evident that we need to become closer together to move forward as a team. As leaders, if a situation comes up, people have to work together. Implementing a change is always challenging because sometimes people don't buy into it. We need to find common ground to move forward. (Senior Leader, Meeting Notes, October 2010, p. 2)

We need to blitz that we expect you to go to your designated school unless you are going to a specific program. We would need to identify what those programs are . . . we also talked about having discussion about honours programming. We have to temper it all with still trying to do the best things for kids. What is the best possible situation we can put our students in, and not just for the convenience of the system. (Principal, Meeting Notes, October 2010, p. 2)

What you are doing at the school cannot negatively impact the system. A lot of people I have spoken to felt that competition between schools has been detrimental to the system. (Senior Leader, Meeting Notes, October 2010, p. 2)

A new process was developed for the 2011–2012 school year and beginning in December 2010, there was an enhanced system-level public relations campaign to promote students attending their designated schools. Senior leadership messaging, news releases, and common school newsletter inserts were among the tools used.

A senior leader discussed the intention to begin promoting attendance at designated schools. This is an intentional shift in philosophy. We are shifting from open houses and a competitive marketplace to showcasing the good things that are happening and available in all schools . . . Through commitment and partnership, this initiative is working to build a sense of community with our designated schools. (Board Minutes, December 2010, p. 3)

As noted in the SP News (2011),

SRSDC has begun promoting designated schools as opposed to school of choice, and has come up with conditions for those looking for boundary exemptions . . . At the SRSDC December 2010 Board of Trustees meeting, the intention to begin promoting attendance at designated schools was discussed. The Director of Communication Services with SRSDC, said the initiative has been coming for a while. "We have a new Board, and we have a new superintendent, and they are really focused on strengthening those neighbourhood connections," the Director

of Communications said. "It's just an area they feel strongly about, and they're moving forward towards leadership." She added that one of the main reasons for promoting designated schools is to create a community among families and the schools they attend. (Proulx, 2011)

The changes in the boundary exemption process are evidenced in following newsletter article (SRSDC, 2010) (bold in original).

**SRSDC Announces Important Changes to the Boundary Exemption Process**

All SRSDC schools provide quality educational programming. Thus, SRSDC encourages families to register their children at their **Designated School**; however, sometimes situations arise when families would like to register at a **School of Choice**. The following information clarifies the boundary exemption process for all schools in SRSDC.

You may only submit **one** boundary exemption request at a time.

Students and parents will be asked to provide reasons for the boundary exemption request. All requests must be based on valid educational criteria and/or strong rationale, such as access to a specific course or program not offered at the Designated School, concern for the health and security of their child, joint custody families in which the parents/guardians live in separate households, families in the process of moving to a new area, etc.

The principals from the Designated School and the School of Choice will review the merit of the request and determine the outcome.

There are several key changes in this revised approach: parents were required to

justify their rationale for attending a school that was not their designated school, decision-making was more centralized, formal collaboration that included the Associate Superintendent of Instructional Services was required, and there was an appeal process (directly to the Superintendent). It is important to note that the legislative parameters around school choice (i.e., Section 45 of the *School Act*) had not changed. The previous interpretation that Section 45 had imposed a system of open boundaries limited only by resource and facility considerations (evident in Phases 1, 2, and 3) was not prioritized in the new boundary exemption process.

A senior leader shared with attendees that although choice is supported in the *School Act* and supported by Alberta Education, this initiative (*the promotion of designated schools*) will allow SRSDC to better manage boundary exemptions. (Committee of School Council [COSC], January, 2011, p. 3)

The rationale for the new process was explained at the January 2011 Board meeting.

Every student has a designated school based on his/her address of residence. This focus on a single school system builds on some of the work started last year. In addition to keeping families and neighbourhoods together, there are a number of reasons why SRSDC is promoting attendance at designated schools, including capacity issues, concerns over class sizes, and maintaining room for designated students. SRSDC has a unique blend of urban and rural schools, therefore encourages families to go to their designated schools to allow their school to continue offering a selection of viable programs, especially in rural areas close to urban areas. The designated school concept also helps build and strengthen

connection in the community and promotes a feeling of ownership within a school—a family of schools. As students get to know the staff and generally stay with the same members of their peer group, transitioning is easier, specifically between Grades 6 and 7, and 9 and 10. As we look at offering education from a system perspective, we have some programming that is only offered at certain schools—IB, alternative Christian, Logos, a number of options are offered at most of our high schools such as cosmetology and food studies so we can offer these to students within their communities. However, we do realize there are some cases that will require students to move from their designated schools. (Board Highlights, January 2011, p. 1)

One final significant change was the removal of the requirement for families to apply for a boundary exemption on an annual basis (SRSDC Attendance Areas and Boundary Exemptions Administrative Procedure, 2011):

*Attendance Areas and Boundary Exemptions Administrative Procedure*

- 1. Grade 1-Grade 12 students attending a non-designated school through a boundary exemption do not need to annually submit a boundary exemption request form until they are changing schools.*
- 2. The siblings of students already attending a non-designated school, including a school with a closed boundary, shall be permitted to register in the same school if the sibling(s) will be attending the school at the same time.*

The “official” reasons for the changes, illustrated above, were numerous: building community and connections; improved transitions; and improving planning, budgeting,

and use of facilities. The policy shifts were significant not only because there were restrictions on choice, the changes also impacted site-based decision-making and principals' autonomy. The perceptions of interviewees paint a more complex picture about the perceptions of both the drivers and the nature of the policy changes. Many considered the shifts to be well-intentioned but misdirected, controlling, and/or protectionist in nature.

I think when things moved sort of central and boundary exemptions were coming here centrally and people had to provide a reason, I think the intention behind that was good. I think there was a real feeling of we're trying to protect to some degree enrolment in certain schools, we're trying to get some sense of control over it. (Central Services Leader, Interview)

I think a lot of it seemed to revolve around competition and about what we affectionately called sheep stealing. That was seen as being very negative and that was a big part of the driver to eliminate or to rein back that change a little bit. (Principal, Interview)

Well I think one of them was definitely that idea of planning, so that principals want to know how many people they can expect. I think another driver was maybe that idea or that awareness that there is some benefit to a community school where your children go to this school and chances are they're also with those kids for soccer or swimming lessons or hockey or whatever. But that

argument doesn't really wash too much with me. I don't think we have that kind of society anymore where we have those kids all walking to school together or playing after school in the park. . . . So that idea of the neighbourhood school, although it sounds good and you can't argue with it, it's like a motherhood idea, but I'm not sure that that's a real driving force. (Principal, Interview)

I just thought the way I saw it from a person on the outside was that our problems would be fixed if everyone went back to their own schools. If we all just went to our designated schools, everything will be right in the world. (Trustee, Interview)

Parents were very vocal in the fact that they just saw this as a trumped up effort to compensate for what they felt were marginal schools and would tell me straight up that that was the reason. Those vocal parents saw no merit in the process even though we could articulate this is a reason why we can't have kids going everywhere, we want kids to go to their designated schools. (Principal, Interview)

We had capacity issues across our schools and growing community perceptions on certain school communities, so we had to do something. (Trustee, Interview)

So when it comes to decision-making, a lot of the decisions are made based on what it might do to another school. Like I say, let the schools do what they do best. If a school is weak, let's deal with that one school. The senior leadership

wanted everyone to be the same, but we're not the same. (Principal, Interview)

I think it was an attempt to improve schools by controlling whether children were able to go or not. The belief was if we just had better kids we'd have a better school, which I think is wrong . . . I think we need to then look at schools that are perceived as underperforming and look at how we can support those schools as opposed to changing the whole system to somehow do that. To me that was ill conceived, and failed. (Principal, Interview)

Well it's interesting because I went to one parent meeting and right away a parent put up his hand and said, "This is about fixing schools isn't it? Fix those schools, leave us alone." (Principal, Interview)

The implementation of the new boundary exemption process based on a valid educational reason was challenging. Principals referenced several challenges: the amount of work required with limited changes in enrolment; confusion among parents, students, and staff; heightened stress and anxiety; and frustrated and angry parents (Principal Survey, June 2011).

Parent reactions to these changes were mixed but the parents who were against the changes were vocal and persistent. In January 2011, the SRSDC Director of Communications noted,

"It's something new, so until people truly understand some of the options that are

available in their designated schools, and the great quality of schools that we have throughout SRSDC, they may need to work through that process with us,” she said. “We’re not getting rid of choice, but we are asking parents to look towards their designated school first, and see the benefits of community, and of working with their school.” (Proulx, 2011)

Throughout 2011–2012 and 2012–2013, active school choosers did not demonstrate a willingness to “work through the process.” In response to the restrictions, many interviewees and board documents reference stress, frustration, anxiety, and confusion in the parent community, particularly in SC county. Parents mobilized to advocate for what they believed was “their right” to choose for their children. The type of resistance and advocacy reflected a high level of social capital.

There is that sense of entitlement. People would not be so willing to give up that right that they’ve had for so long, to take it away from them doesn’t go over very well, as we have experienced in a 2-year period. (Trustee, Interview)

I think there was an underestimation of our parent group as they come from all different kinds of professions. They looked at Section 45 of the *School Act* and found out, oh by the way, you’re infringing on my right to choice in Section 45. Then it didn’t take too long for the other parents in the community to find out about Section 45 and get their own lawyer. (Trustee, Interview)

There was not due attention or consideration given to the fact that people talk . . .

All it takes is a first, second, third, fourth person to go through the appeal process and get it granted and start sharing about that. (Principal, Interview)

In addition to parent resistance, there was a parallel school boundary review process that increased parents' opportunities to provide feedback on the new boundary exemption restrictions. As a senior leader noted, "parents and staff provided considerable feedback on the boundary exemption process during the first phase of Reimagining and SRSDC is committed to review the process" (Board Minutes, December 2012, p. 3).

SRSDC also sought a legal opinion from the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) in the spring of 2012. The ASBA lawyer reaffirmed that Section 45 (3) of the *School Act* is the most relevant to boundary exemption process as it sets the parameters for enrolment by non-residents to a particular school requested by the parent. As stated previously, the granting of the request is dependent on whether, in the opinion of the board asked to enroll the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student. The lawyer shared several potential legal risks to the restrictive boundary exemption process: denying a student solely on the basis of a valid educational reason if the requested school has the resources and facilities to accommodate, using budgeting processes and timelines to determine boundary exemption deadlines, and considering the impact on the out-going school as this impact is irrelevant based on the *School Act* (Board of Trustees, Education Committee Minutes, May 2012).

In response to the feedback, legal opinion, and research in other school divisions, the boundary exemption process was, once again, revised.

How do we set up a process that really provides choice that we can manage, win-

win, everybody's happy? . . . We looked at a balanced approach and we recognized the fact that schools have certain capacities. So we evolved into determining the capacity of the school and then limited the number of students per grade or per program, and that was the only guiding factor in determining choice . . . When we tried to have students give us a reason we really felt that we were trying to manage the process and trying to manage the capacities and enrolments at schools. (Senior Leader, Interview)

*Boundary exemption process (2013–2014 to present).* The final shift in the boundary exemption request process was introduced in early 2013 and has been in place for the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. SRSDC posted changes to Administrative Procedure 305. The procedure now titled, *Attendance Areas and Boundary Exemptions*, states,

*The Board has established attendance areas resulting in designated schools for SRSDC resident students. Established attendance areas and designated schools promote a feeder school framework that supports students progressing from kindergarten to Grade 12 as a community of learners.*

*Definitions*

*Alternative program: an educational program that emphasizes a particular language, culture, religion or subject matter or uses a particular teaching philosophy; but that is not a special education program.*

*Closed boundary: a school with a closed boundary is a school that does not have sufficient space or resources to register new out-of-boundary students.*

*Designated school: the school to which a student is assigned as indicated by the Division's current boundary maps.*

*Optimal enrolment limit: the limit on the number of students that can be registered at a school, or in a grade or program at a school.*

*Random selection procedure: the process at Central Services to select out-of-boundary students when requests exceed available space.*

The new process continued to promote designated schools; however, there are several key differences: the requirement that parents/students have a rationale for attending another school was removed, optimal enrolment limits were introduced, space became the primary decision-making criterion, and a random selection procedure was introduced as the mechanism used when boundary exemption requests exceed a school's capacity to accommodate.

The changes in procedure were discussed in a local newspaper in which a senior leader states,

The process is different this year . . . There is basically a month opening where they (*parents*) have to provide us with their intent. In other words, they need to plan out, they need to be very purposeful and intentional in their decision to go to a non-designated school . . . We reviewed our practice and went out and looked at what other school divisions have been doing. . . . We looked at trying to make it more transparent and fair. (Wilkie, 2013)

At the onset of this new process, my personal journal and meeting minutes evidence cautions: Principals expressed concern that reducing choice restrictions will

exacerbate uneven distribution among urban schools and between urban and rural schools, parents from smaller rural schools expressed concern that small school enrolments would be significantly impacted by the new process (Committee of School Councils [COSC], January 2012), and trustees questioned whether the random selection process was student-centred (Board Minutes, October 2012). However, there was also appreciation. At the January 2013, COSC meeting, several parents expressed appreciation that senior leadership listened to parents and revised the process to make it less restrictive (COSC Minutes, January 2013).

As this approach has only been in place for 2 years, potential and unintended outcomes are largely unknown; however, interviewees were willing to share their opinions. Generally speaking, the opinions shared during the interviews were not openly discussed during leadership meetings. Interviewees commented on the inevitability of choice and the overall process.

I realize Alberta, because school of choice is embedded in the *School Act*, there's not really much we can do. I would suggest probably where we are right now is the best compromise that you can have. If you have space and people want to come to your school, then you take them. (Principal, Interview)

I think there are still schools who feel a little bit hard done by because they lose more students than they would like to. But at the same time I think they understand that we don't really have any real right to say no. We would be very hard pressed to defend a reason to say why a student couldn't go to a school when

there's space for them. (Senior Leader, Interview)

I believe it's more acceptable saying, okay this is the maximum for this school and everything. If we're already at or exceeded that, we shouldn't be taking on kids. I think we have a moral obligation to do that. The deadline I think is reasonable. I think it's reasonable to say that you have to declare your intent to us by a certain deadline. I think that was reasonable because part of that is being able to budget and plan. (Trustee, Interview)

It seems to me like the boundary exemption process is working and people that want those boundary exemptions now are free to choose that option and are being accommodated with that. Those are being granted and you're not having to write an essay and follow some strict criteria. People are happier, families are happier being in schools that they feel they've had some say in where they could have their kids educated. (Principal, Interview)

So I like the idea that we have now that you're encouraged to go to your designated school. If you feel that you need your child to go to another school for whatever reason, then certainly apply. But it will be a process and it's not just a phone call . . . I think that's a good process. (Central Services Leader, Interview)

Some interviewees were concerned about the reduced focus on what's in the best educational interest for children.

But we're not encouraging people to do those boundary exemptions. We're not encouraging them to say, what school is going to be best for your child? Go and see if there's room, and if there's room that's where you should be going.

(Principal, Interview)

The school of choice boundary exemption process, is there a perfect one? I'm not sure. I guess my stand is and always has been it should be educationally sound for the child. Children will adapt wherever they go to school, but historically there have been good reasons for children to change from one school to another. Maybe they're repeating a grade, maybe having difficulties with teachers, having difficulties with other students. Those are good educationally sound reasons to have a student attend a different school. Now it just seems to be, well my friends are going, maybe I'll go there. Or I can go play basketball there, they have a good team. Or volleyball, whatever the case may be. It is a reason, not necessarily a great reason. (Principal, Interview)

In the latter part of Phase 4, selection processes were primarily eliminated.

Student selection is based on the school's space availability and if requests exceeds capacity, then there is a random selection process. Some believe that this is a "fairer" process while others believe removal of judgment and professional decision-making are problematic. The differences in opinion reflect the degree to which leaders are comfortable with the ambiguity of information and discretion in decision-making. Should rules be black or white? Or should rules be shades of grey?

But I think people see it as the best possible imperfect solution. I don't think anybody likes it. Nobody's going to want to be the loser in that lottery. But I think they also appreciate the randomness of it. It's not picking, you are the winners and you are the losers. It is completely random, not based on your marks, not based on who you are at all, it is just random. I think there is a perception, and I think it's a reality, that that's much fairer than what we had before. It takes that judgment piece out and I think people are more comfortable with that.

(Senior Leader, Interview)

I think it's a little bit of an easy way out of making a decision and I don't think it's necessarily going to mean the best. Where there was the opportunity to meet people, sometimes you can tell from a conversation with a principal or with whoever, this is probably not the best fit for us and our family. Really as an administrator, you're probably going to save yourself a whole lot of grief and headaches if that's known early and you make another choice. (Trustee, Interview)

I think it's a way of not having to make a decision basically. As opposed to making a decision on being a sound educational move we're saying, well let's just draw it out of a hat and let it be what it is. I think that's just abdicating responsibility. (Principal, Interview)

I think in the end a lottery may then exclude people who have really a terrific reason to go because there is a specialized program at a school that they want to get into that would make sense. But at the same time I think it’s impossible to really discern good from not so good, so I guess it’s as good as anything.

(Principal, Interview)

Over the course of Phase 4, enrolment data show a decrease in the percentage of students who attend a non-designated school.

Table 8

*Phase 4: Enrolment at Non-Designated Schools in Phase 4*

| Year           | Average enrolment at non designated schools in Phase 4 |
|----------------|--|
| September 2010 | 25.95%   |
| September 2011 | 25.25%   |
| September 2012 | 23.23%   |
| September 2013 | 21.65%   |

**Marketing and school promotion.** Phases 1 through 3 descriptions demonstrated that marketing and school promotion were part of practice but they were also seen as problematic. As part of the new governance model, the previous Board policy on *School Choice and the Promotion of Schools* was removed from the policy manual. An administrative procedure on school promotion was not developed. As part of the work of the boundary exemption review committee and in accordance with the “school system” philosophy promoted by senior leadership, changes were made to the expected practice around marketing and promotion. Specifically, in Phase 4, junior and senior high schools

were no longer permitted to hold open houses. An information evening, held after the deadline for boundary requests exemption and on the same night at all schools, replaced school specific open houses. Active recruiting and marketing were not allowed. This change in practice is considered an “understanding” among leaders. The change in practice was not universally supported, particularly among parents who are active choosers.

I think the open houses, I think that’s an issue. I would really love to see parents be able to make informed decisions and be able to have that opportunity to myth bust, and the ability for some schools to hang onto their designated kids because the parents came out. (Trustee, Interview).

I experienced many parents that would go to all the open houses. They would be sometimes surprised that the designated school they thought they didn’t want to go to, they get there at the open house and change their mind....The principal talked about the rationale behind programming decisions and I would hear from parents that they actually changed their mind because they never knew what the rationale was . . . They said, you know what, you’re right, that’s true, and they stayed with the designated school instead of moving on. (Trustee, Interview).

**Student transportation.** In terms of student transportation, fees continued to increase in Phase 4. Policy language also changed. Pay-ride and school of choice fees have now been replaced by ineligible and non-designated transportations fees. The revised language is more technical in nature and focused more on the funding guidelines

as opposed to part of an educational endeavour. Policy language was used as a tool to re-construct choice in the community.

Table 9

*Phase 4: Student Transportation Fees in Phase 4*

|            | Pay Ride   | School of Choice |
|------------|------------|------------------|
| March 2010 | 275        | 325              |
| March 2011 | 300        | 350              |
| March 2012 | 300        | 350              |
|            | Ineligible | Non-Designated   |
| March 2013 | 375        | 400              |
| March 2014 | 395        | 440              |

**Summary: Phase 4.** Phase 4 represented a significant shift in how choice operated in SRSDC, particularly in relation to choice through boundary exemptions. Technical concerns relating to space and facility utilization and ongoing concerns with budget disparities were evident. Furthermore, there was a shift in philosophy of senior leadership in relation to the role of competition and site-based leadership and a reduction in the devolution of authority to principals (Hammad, 2013).

I think collaboration is going to generate a lot more innovation and creativity than competition in how you deliver education. (Senior Leader, Interview)

There was more autonomy given to the schools over time – now that is autonomy

in budget, decision-making, and a number of areas – that was again embedded in policy but also in process. That naturally led to more of a competitive nature as well, because people were looking at how they could make their school the best possible school. That’s okay but you also have to consider if you’re disadvantaging some other school. Why would you impact an educational situation for other students negatively just to gain from it? (Senior Leader, Interview)

The changes are indicative of the changes going from more of a site-based to more of a division based kind of approach to it. When it was more site-based there was a desire for schools to be directly involved and accept as many students as they could or wanted. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The intent of the policy and practice changes was to create more equity among schools. However, the shifts in philosophy were met with resistance from parents, students, and principals. Dealing with resistance coupled with attempts to address technical challenges translated into a more prescriptive policy approach. There were tighter deadlines, more rules, scripts to follow, and centralized decision-making. Although there were attempts to address inequities among schools, overall there was limited acknowledgment in policy that families do not have the economic and social capital to engage in school choice equitably (Davies & Aurini, 2008). Transportation fees continued to increase, language was more technical, and the process was in constant flux and required more active engagement with the boundary exemption process.

Phase 4 continued to demonstrate the influence and the role of parents, and specifically the role of parents with economic and social capital, in shaping choice policies. Parents assumed a vocal role as policy critics in Phase 4 when attempts were made to restrict “their right to choose.” Previous research has demonstrated that wealthy and well educated parents use social networks and differentially engage in and benefit from school choice (Waslander et al., 2010). My research demonstrates how parents use social networks and social capital to advocate against policy changes that attempted to restrict their choices. Again, aligning with other research in this area, the restrictive phase also demonstrated that parents who are active choosers were more concerned about the potential impacts on “their child” as opposed the community at large (Crozier et al., 2008; Raveaud & Van Zanten, 2007). Parent feedback demonstrated the concept of individualism and duty to oneself (Beck & Beck-Gernshiem, 2002) as well as rising anxiety in relation to choice restrictions.

It feels like SC county is under attack. (Parent Feedback, Re-imagining Report)

We seem to be closing doors and opportunities for our kids rather than giving them opportunities. (Parent Feedback, Reimagining Report)

Policy, in Phase 4, at both the Board and senior leader levels, involved less public consultation. The focus was more on the technical elements of policy rather than the political work needed for a significant policy change (Howlett et al., 2009). Although easier planning has been demonstrated in previous research as a motivation for reduced choice (Pater, Waslander, & Bunar, 2009), the perception that planning was a primary

policy driver of the choice restriction was a concern raised by policy critics (principals and parents). The “informal” narrative around policy changes was not about equity but rather ease of planning, convenience, and protection of under-performing schools.

Policies and prescriptive policy implementation tools (such as division communication, telephone scripts, and email scripts) were developed by central services and distributed for use by principals. Although there was a significant shift in official rhetoric with “choice” being minimized and discouraged, the “backstory” shared in informal networks was far more complex and offered a strong counter-narrative.

### **Section Six: Overall Summary of the Phases**

The phase descriptions outlined and demonstrated the shifts both in school choice policy design and policy intention. SRSDC evolved from a school division that actively promoted and supported choice to one that tried to restrict, manage, and discourage choice. The various school choice policies were driven, in part, by the philosophy of senior leadership and by pragmatic realities at the division and school levels. In all phases, policies had various unintended consequences.

There was evidence throughout the case study that policy, at both the Board and senior leadership levels, was used as a guide for planning and decision-making. As a newly formed organization, the first SRSDC Board of Trustees and senior leadership were focused on policy development and ensuring that were poised, from a policy perspective, to embrace the possibilities and confront the challenges of educational restructuring. In Phase 1, Board minutes explicitly reflect that the Board continually referred to their Alternative Program, System Programs of Choice, and Attendance Areas

policies when discussing and making decisions about school choice proposals and partnerships. It was, at least partially, through policy that Christian-based programming became an integral component of SRSDC; programming for students with high academic abilities was increased; and boundaries exemptions were encouraged, celebrated, and increasingly accessed. The Board and senior leadership in Phase 1 were committed to SRSDC increasing choices within the system and moving toward the realization of their vision of a more comprehensive public school system. Policies were enabling of urban choice expansion in Phase 1. In terms of challenges, operational efficiencies and the inequities between urban and rural schools were two issues that the Board faced. The Board attempted to address the inequity through their funding models. The challenge of inequity for rural schools was addressed through funding, “equity of opportunity” funding, which ensured small rural schools could offer a basic education. Thus, from the onset “equity” was being defined based on the allocation of resources and judged at the school level.

In Phase 2, there was no evidence of substantive changes in relationship to the philosophy of school choice. Senior leaders continued to believe in the value of choice and site-based leadership. However, there were concerns from principals and trustees. The primary concerns related to the relationships among principals, the tensions relating to marketing and competition, the inequities among schools, and the costs of transportation. Generally, the changes to school choice policies during Phase 2 were intended to bring more rationality, more logic, and more clarity to the categorization and operation of school choice. These additions included clarification of system versus

school based programs, a new policy on School Choice and the Promotion of Schools, and the introduction of a school of choice busing fee. Inequities among schools were, again, addressed through funding changes. A Budget Allocation Review Committee recommended changes to school budget allocations. The program classification method, additional rules for choice, and the changes to the allocation model did not substantially change the level of inequities among schools or improve relationships.

There was no evidence of significant policy changes during Phase 3.

Furthermore, the evidence and my experience suggest that decisions often lacked transparency and appeared to minimally consider formal policies. At the Board level, there was an increase in in-camera Board meetings, shortened public meetings, and Board minutes consisted of motions and votes only. At the senior leadership level, the membership of the Administrative Leadership Council and the number of meetings decreased resulting in less collaboration and perceived concentration of power at the Senior Leadership level. The perceived concentration of power and perceived lack of coherent decision-making coupled with the number of administrative changes made Phase 3 a challenging time for SRSDC from an organizational perspective.

Phase 4 represented significant shifts in policy processes and policy characteristics. The Board of Trustees retained only policies that specifically related to their legislative governance role and operational matters were delegated to the senior leadership level. Both the reduction in the number of policies and the manner in which the policy changes were done (i.e., without public consultation), seemed to result in a diminishing role of the Board. In Phase 4, senior leadership had increased autonomy

through administrative procedures to make significant changes to school division operations. There were several pressing concerns in Phase 4: the urban areas of SRSDC were facing considerable population growth, some school leaders were becoming increasingly frustrated with the number of boundary exemptions, some schools were perceived as enrolling students beyond their facility's capacity, and there were uneven space utilizations. In Phase 4, there was a stated shift in the philosophy of senior leadership in terms of a commitment to a school system philosophy including equity across the division. However, similar to other phases, the commitment to broad principles was reduced to changes in the resource allocation method. The Resource Optimization Committee (ROC) made recommendations to reduce the inequities among schools through a fixed and variable allocation model. In addition to changes in funding allocations, a more restrictive and prescriptive choice policy approach was adopted and decision-making became increasingly centralized.

Clearly, there were changes to, and challenges with, school choice policies throughout the case study. Many of the changes (e.g., the types of choice programs that developed, the focus on marketing, and the strains on collegial relationships) align with much of the research literature on school choice. The next chapter uses the characteristics of complex adaptive systems to understand and provide insight into how and why policies were enacted.

## **Chapter Six: Analysis & Discussion**

### **Overview**

My research engaged with the complexity of school choice policies in one public school division in the province of Alberta. As demonstrated in the phase descriptions in chapter five, there were significant changes to policy and practice over the case study time period. The case, therefore, provided an opportunity to look at the evolution and manifestation of school choice policies over time. A complex adaptive system (CAS) framework, as the primary conceptual framework, provided constructs to engage with the policy changes and offer explanatory insights into the policy processes and outcomes within an organization. The discussion that follows focuses on the school division as a complex adaptive system and the potential of this framework for theory and practice. The implications detailed in this chapter are based on five characteristics of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS): CAS as open systems with fuzzy boundaries, CAS consisting of interconnected agents within a network with parallel systems of informal and formal rules, adaptive responses, and system effects, CAS having distributed rather than centralized control, cyclical feedback mechanisms operating in a CAS, and CAS having emergent properties. The case study provides evidence of each one of these characteristics and these characteristics and their interactions offer tentative explanatory mechanisms for policy evolutions and outcomes. Specifically, by incorporating the characteristics of CAS with a value position based on a democratic education project, this case study provides evidence of the influence and insidiousness of the market view of society, offers partial descriptions of how collective obligation is constructed in the

organization, details some of the challenges of site-based leadership, and demonstrates how the metaphor of the game with adaptive responses is valuable to understanding policy enactment. Finally, it is argued that the interactions of the CAS characteristics resulted in the emergence of inequity as the norm within Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). Specifically, although not intended, the interactions among agents and the formal and informal rules, inevitably led to a more inequitable system. In other words, despite best intentions of the organization and agents, the “rules” inevitably shape what is adaptive in the organization. The rules, in SRSDC, prioritize self-interest whether it is at the school principal or parent levels.

### **The Influence of a Market View of Society**

Complex adaptive systems (CAS) are open systems. Openness for the school divisions is both abstract, in terms of ideas, and concrete, in terms of geographic boundaries. This section focuses on the abstract and how the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) and its constituent agents were influenced by broader policy ideas and trends.

Global and provincial neo-liberal inspired narratives and rhetoric make connections among competition, choice and school improvement. These ideas are ideologically connected to neo-liberalism and they are effective in that they have the ring of “common sense” (Anderson, 2009). At the onset of my research it was argued that school choice really involves questions about the proper goals of public education (McLaughlin, 2005) as these policies impact children and families through the provision of educational resources and opportunities. For those concerned about the democratic

education project, my research provides additional support for the need for caution around the implementation of educational policies that introduce market mechanisms as a means to provide educational opportunities and programming. The influence of market principles was prevalent throughout the case study. Specifically, the influence of the market view of society was evidenced at four levels: policy agents' belief systems about choice, various procedural policies, language, and school choice programs. This section reviews agents' belief systems, procedural policies, and language use. The topic of the type of school choice programs is covered in the section on system effects.

SRSDC, as an organization, has been influenced by the rhetoric associated with school choice. Although interviewees did not talk specifically about the school division as a marketplace, there is ample evidence to support that the market conception of society and financial considerations have significantly shaped SRSDC organizational realities. In this case study, in both the organization documents and in interviews, there was clear evidence that the agents and the organization have been influenced by the broader narratives linking competition, choice, and school improvement. Firstly, the majority of interviewees felt there was a connection among school choice, school improvement, and the competence of school leaders. In other words, there was, and is, a widely held belief that more open choice systems create, and created, a climate of improvement. These perceptions align with tenets of neoliberalism and are at least partially based on the beliefs that the uncertainty in a competitive marketplace causes people to self-reflect, improve practice, strive for excellence, and ultimately, be more responsive to students and the community.

The strength and veracity of these beliefs are demonstrated in that, despite all the challenges associated with school choice, the connections of choice with responsiveness, quality, and improvement were seen throughout the course of the case study. The association between choice and improvement was noted in Phase 1 and 2 when market principles were introduced and emphasized.

No, I don't think it would've [*improved teaching practice*] happened. I don't think it would've happened in the same way at all. Without that element of uncertainty it's very easy to be status quo and be complacent and just become described as "this is the way it is." But all kinds of forces were making that happen. There were policy forces, there were government forces, there was the idea that people wanted to be able to make a choice. (Principal, Interview)

It was upping the ante. There was that whole shift to competitiveness which we go back and forth on, but I think there's some value in some sense of we were all part of the same district but a sense of competitiveness keeps us sharp. (Senior Leader, Interview)

So I think that schools do need to continually do everything they can to develop their programming, to keep their facility new, clean, and updated. I think they've got to look at new innovations, new technology, all if they can hope to attract that student base. So I think that's what's important as opposed to sort of just assuming that these people are in your area so they are going to come to your

school. (Principal, Interview)

So some of it, I think is quite healthy in that sense, and I think that's the reason why we end up with a stronger education system, because we're always challenged to make sure that we are in tune with what our community values and what they're looking for. If not, they'll go somewhere else and get it. (Trustee, Interview)

But I think choice also pushed us as a system and pushed us as individual schools to expand how we looked at traditional education. The honours system that's there, it came from that system honours program at CLB. I think other people saw it was possible to do that, and therefore other programming was expanded for the same reason. I think we as educators in most cases want to try and develop the best possible programming we can for kids. School of choice allows that to happen. (Senior Leader, Interview)

You wouldn't see a horticulture course there, you wouldn't see a soccer program or a hockey program or anything like that, because they're not forced to do anything. They can easily just pump out the same thing year after year with not really much thought about all the different things that we have. We have yoga, like all sorts of things. We have one course there where it teaches kids how to fix computers. So they are all very different, and these are fantastic opportunities.

(Trustee, Interview)

The association between school choice and educational quality was also made during Phase 4. Analysis revealed that some interviewees and parents were concerned that the restrictive choice approach initially adopted in Phase 4 might result in a decline in the quality of education.

By removing boundary exemptions, you remove choice and you remove the opportunity for great programming to be rewarded. A lot of students could use special programs, some kids excel at athletics or arts as a backdrop. Let people choose what is best for their children. Let schools choose a specialty, let them determine how to attract people. Schools should fit the student, not the other way around. (Parent Feedback, Reimagining Report, p. 163)

It is a healthy lesson in life that with great leadership and support you can create something bigger that people want to be a part of. There is a healthy sense of competition by trying to attract students to your school where they would excel in areas that they thrive in. By creating boundaries I believe you are taking away opportunities for my children to find a school that will target their strengths and interests and help them gain more than a great education but an awareness for what they do in their life and give them opportunities to excel at a young age. I believe creating boundaries and taking away our choice will actually make us weaker and create just “par” for our children. I was proud to live in a community where our motto was “Excellence by Choice.” Our school system lived that out

and we saw greatness from it. (Parent Feedback, Reimagining Report, p. 168)

The cynics would say, now in SRSDC we used to be excellence by choice. The cynics have said to me and I'm just quoting them, the cynics would say, mediocrity by design. See here's the interesting comment that you've asked about. We've lost the word excellence, we have lost the word excellence.

(Principal, Interview)

In SRSDC, quality leadership is at least partially constructed by how school leaders respond to competitive environments. Proponents of choice, all of whom did not work in preferred schools, generally believed there was a relationship between the competence of school leaders and their willingness and ability to adapt and thrive in a competitive environment.

The junior highs at the time, you saw who the complainers were and who were the ones that were going, okay, I'll meet this head on. Then the other ones basically, some of them would come with their hand out saying, help me. Others would complain about it but they would do something about it, which was important . . .

Again, it spoke volumes about the administrators and the assistant administrators.

(Senior Leader, Interview)

Anyone that's ever grumbled to me personally, phoned me up and said about us stealing kids or whatever, and this is just an opinion that I have, have never been any of the high flyers. It's always been people in a school that's struggling and

they're not a high flyer principal and they're annoyed with us that we took some kids, and they phone and give me the gears. So I'm thinking, you know what, actually if you'd run a better program you might not be losing kids. (Principal, Interview)

We want to be that school that people come to and look at. A lot of stuff we want to do has nothing to do with French immersion, it just has to do with innovative practice and creating better learning spaces. I guess the difference is here when our numbers go up we feel it's related to how we're doing. When we get more kids coming we start to go, oh people know. (Principal, Interview)

But I think the approach is not to look at it as taking kids from other schools. If all the kids wanted to leave here next year and go to School X, instead of blaming School X for recruiting I think we should look at what we're doing here that the kids want to leave. Instead of blaming someone else for taking our kids, what are we doing here that they didn't want to be here? I think if we look within ourselves then you can create the school that kids want to be at. (Principal, Interview)

I think if a school isn't going to be competitive and realize that we could lose students, if we don't do those things and keep abreast of everything that's happening, we can lose students. I think it holds schools more accountable to

what they need to be doing. It's a lot more work trying to be a competitive school. (Senior Leader, Interview).

The planning difficulties and school utilization concerns that emerged from the open choice approach in Phases 1 through 3 did not deter proponents of choice. In fact, the "restrictive" choice approach in Phase 4 was perceived as, and criticized for, its intent to "protect" what were perceived to be marginal/under-achieving schools. Again, a school's performance in the education market was linked with the overall quality of educational programming and leadership in the school.

I think there was a perception that some schools were seen as underachieving and the way to correct that was to bring things to a common level, to a common denominator, which I saw rather than elevating it was diminishing the success of some schools. There's one high school and one junior high generally perceived as less desirable, for whatever reason. I think it was an attempt to improve schools by controlling whether children were able to go or not. The belief was if we just had better kids we'd have a better school, which I think is wrong. (Principal, Interview)

Like I say, let the schools do what they do best. If a school is weak, let's deal with that one school. (Principal, Interview)

Other interviewees questioned whether "competition" was necessary to drive improvement. Some, although it was the minority, believe that educators are inherently professional and strength emerges from collaboration, not competition.

I think my point there is that you don't need competition to be doing the best job at a school. I think principals and staff are professional enough to do their best to offer the best services they can for students. I think that even improves when you are sharing best practices among schools and divisions. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Although there is strength in the belief systems of SRSDC agents, the research literature paints a more complex picture regarding the relationships among choice, competition, and improvement. Waslander et al. (2010) note one cannot assume a simple causal relationship between competitive pressure and school changes. Furthermore, the research examining the evidence linking school choice, competition, and improved quality is inconclusive. Specifically, although some research indicates changes to instructional practices and professional development in response to competitive pressure (Ladd & Fiske, 2003; Zimmer & Buddin, 2009), other research suggests competitive pressure is more likely to result in more traditional versus innovative teaching methods as schools respond to parental preference (Lubienski, 2009). However, regardless of academic research literature, what is important from the perspective of the policy process in this case study is that the relationship among choice, competition, and school improvement was experientially valid and believed to be "true" by many school leaders within SRSDC. Beliefs and policies in this case study appear more influenced by broader rhetoric and experiences rather than a critical review of research evidence.

Related to the argument that school choice promotes a more responsive school system is the extension that choice improves parental engagement and empowerment.

The research in this area is, again, inconclusive, particularly research focused on longer term results. Buckley and Schneider (2003) found that parents choosing charter schools are initially somewhat more satisfied with the school after the choice is made but differences fade over time. Furthermore, longitudinal studies show that parents who choose a charter school were already more involved with their child's education before they attended their school of choice (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007; Ladd, 2002). However, within SRSDC, it is a widely held belief that families have higher levels of investment and engagement when they "choose" their school. The "choice" need not be a specific program and, in many cases, it may be the designated school of attendance.

I think when you make the choice your investment can be higher, particular if kids and parents are on the same page going that direction. If they're forced say to go back to a school they don't want to go back to then I think the investment is much lower. (Principal, Interview)

Overall, the broad concept of choice was considered inherently good by the majority of interviewees, which aligns with market values (Gewirtz et al., 1995).

I think if a child, and I'll speak from my own experience, if a child feels they have choice with where they are, they're going to feel positive. We know that positivity and hope breed success. Student happiness and personal fit mean a lot. (Principal, Interview)

But I think when people feel they have a choice that creates power in them, in a

positive way, not in an entitled way. I think that leads to good things. (Principal Interview)

In addition to leaders' belief systems about the inherent value and benefits of choice in the education system, there were numerous examples of procedural policies and practices that reflect the pervasiveness of market principles in day-to-day operations. Measures such as the instructional costs per student, the overall costs per student, transportation rates and school utilization rates often dominated the Board agenda and represent the more explicit examples.

Given the symbolic force and material impacts of provincial and global trends in the mid to late 1990s, it is not surprising that there were direct references to the market, revenue generation, and entrepreneurialism in Phase 1. In Phase 1, there are also specific examples of how market principles influenced local practices. Perhaps one of the clearest was the introduction and operation of the Academy of International Services. Interviewees were clear in their opinion that this entrepreneurial venture was a way to generate revenue. Also in Phase 1, the recommendations around school closures reflect the influence of market principles. Maintaining school operations for a 3-year period with a reduced subsidy in subsequent operational years was the recommendation for both BRU and CHP schools. This recommendation can be seen from two different perspectives - as an opportunity for the community to maintain their schools or as a shift of responsibility to the school and community to increase enrolment or reduce programming in order to become economically viable. The lack of support for redistribution over the long term for small rural schools is hidden in the recommendation.

The recommendations embody market principles and give the appearance of objectivity and fairness but there are implicit market values embedded. These critiques do not imply intentionality on the part of senior leadership or the Board but are put forward to demonstrate the insidious nature of market principles.

Currently, although in Phase 4, there was a purported commitment to a school system philosophy and choice and competition were intentionally and explicitly removed from division documents, the pervasiveness of market principles continues. Market principles are, once again, implicit in recent policy developments in the boundary exemption process. The first example is the optimal enrolment limit. This procedure considers space as the only factor in the determination of approvals of boundary exemptions. Under this procedure, a student is an object that takes up space. Furthermore, the optimal enrolment limit has the appearance of objectivity but it is determined through a subjective process. In addition, the random selection procedure further objectifies students as the process is not about children with unique characteristics and diverse needs but a student is a student is a student. Students are objects that can be counted. A random selection procedure, or lottery, symbolizes fairness but violates the distribution of opportunity based on principled reasons. In many ways, the lottery normalizes “winners and losers” and may further marginalize the chances and needs of vulnerable families. A random draw removes the opportunities to make principled decisions about the distribution of opportunities and further disconnects leaders from decisions. Given that metaphors shape our perspective of reality and guide action (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), it is concerning what the continued drive toward the

appearance of objectivity and rationality will mean in the long term.

Finally, the influence of market principles is also seen in language use. In terms of marketing and recruiting, principals referred to sheep stealing.

I think a lot of it seemed to revolve around competition and about what we affectionately called sheep stealing. That was seen as being very negative and that was a big part of the driver to eliminate or to rein back that change a little bit. I know particularly at high school level there was a time of competition and sheep stealing. (Principal, Interview)

Other language examples include “when you siphon off bunches of kids” (Trustee, Interview) and “when you lose kids to honours often that’s skimming off those kids that are really capable” (Principal, Interview). Again, these statements are not meant to imply intentionality, lack of professionalism, or lack of commitment of educational leaders, but are offered to prompt caution and awareness. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that educational leaders need to have greater awareness of the language they use which mitigates some of the implications of market mechanisms.

Clearly, SRSDC is an “open” organization and its agents were, and are, influenced by global narratives and policy directions promoting the introduction of market mechanisms, specifically the value of choice and competition in relation to high quality education and leadership. Furthermore, there is significant evidence of the pervasiveness of market principles in procedural policies. In SRSDC, the market conception of society has had both symbolic and procedural policy impacts.

### **The Construction of Social Obligations within the Organization**

To understand school choice policies over time in an organization, one has to have a better understanding of the agents within the organization – how they act and feel individually and how they act collectively. The first section of the analysis and discussion demonstrated that individual agents have been influenced by global narratives and market principles. How did these belief systems influence the relationships and interactions among leaders?

The public face and rhetoric of an educational organization is characterized by professionalism, collaboration, and teamwork. However, relationships within an organization are certainly more complex than public documents suggest (Morgan, 2006). Relationships and our representations of relationships help construct collective responsibilities to one other. Primary loyalties and dominant experiences can shape how agents perceive and respond to school choice policies. As policies are enacted in and through interactions and relationships, descriptions of the relationships are an important component to my research. This section examines the metaphors used to describe relationships within Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC).

It is argued that we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. Furthermore, it is argued that we draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). During interviews, participants discussed school choice policy enactment and their interactions through the use of metaphor. The metaphor of a family emerged to

understand the dynamics within the organization in relation to school choice. It was seen by a minority as a positive metaphor and a desirable culture. In the positive version of the metaphor, the family is seen idealistically with close bonds and minimal animosity.

I did everything I could to build a family amongst the administrators. I believe that when I left, which would've been 6 years after the movement towards choice began, I don't believe there was animosity between the schools. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The majority of interviewees, however, used the family metaphor with a more negative connotation, which has significant implications for agents' interactions with one another and for how equity and collective responsibility were constructed.

I do not think we should be running an organization, a school or a school district as a family metaphor, because all families are dysfunctional and we overlook things. I always felt like an outsider in SRSDC because I was not part of the family. I did not want to be part of the family. I think there are behaviors that happened amongst principals and amongst staff that should not have happened, but they happened because we've known each other for so long. (Senior Leader, Interview).

In their "realities," SRSDC leaders used the family metaphor to describe to whom they had primary loyalty and to illustrate the power positions among geographical regions, among schools, and within a school. One use of the family metaphor emerged in descriptions of the relationships between urban and rural schools. As noted in the Phase 1 description, when SRSDC was first formed through regionalization, there were tensions

between the urban and rural regions. These tensions were expressed using the metaphor of family.

There was a pervasive belief that the county of LC and west part of the county of MIN were really unwanted country cousins, I know that is probably close to reality. Regionalization could be compared to a shotgun wedding. (Board Minutes, October 2001, p. 18)

But I think SC County people thought that they were going to benefit from our technology and that there was going to be less for our schools because we were taking on the country cousins. (Principal, Interview)

Then you also had the country cousins who, well we can't do anything about it [choice and programming], what about us? (Senior Leader, Interview)

Why were schools in LM and MIN counties referred to as the country cousins?

This description is related to the relative inefficiency of and inequity experienced by rural schools. Throughout the case study, there were different levels of attention and different course of actions taken to address the differences between rural and urban schools.

However, in terms of constructing collective obligation, the cousin labelling is used to minimize the division's and the urban schools' overall responsibilities to the rural region as the cousin is not an important member of the family. This was evident in relation to negative connotation attached to the term subsidy during the school closure debates.

Therefore, a larger question is whether it is possible for rural schools and rural

communities to feel like equitable partners when the majority of the division is urban and urban issues dominate the agenda? Although many interviewees felt that the organization was more united now from a geographical perspective, others noted that the tensions among geographic areas remain. Describing the current situation,

There's people in our division that call themselves the East Side. (Principal, Interview)

If you want to be honest with yourself you could line up ten leaders and tell them you're going to school A and you're going to school B, and watch their reactions. In a lot of leaders' minds there are places they will not go based on what they think they know. The sad part is a lot of them have not ever stepped across the threshold of some of these places. (Principal, Interview)

The family metaphor was also used to describe primary loyalties and relationships among schools, particularly in terms of attracting students and the boundary exemption process.

Someone told me this once and I believe it, that the school you're working at should be the best school you've ever been. If you believe that and act like that, that's a great thing for everybody that you work with. So yes, you want to protect your people and you want to do what's best, and you don't look to the rest of this division as your family. (Principal, Interview)

The first informal tightening up was when we actually started to talk about being

considerate and fair to your junior high cousins. (Principal, Interview)

I wouldn't want to take students from outside of the urban part of SC County. I didn't want to take their kids because I knew what impact it would have for them. For some strange reason I didn't feel the same way about my sister school across town. But it's complicated because people want to come to your school. It would be hard for me to say, no you can't come to my school. (Principal, Interview)

In our own community, we don't look at ourselves as a division of schools. In our own community, two siblings did not look at each other as coming from the same family. They really looked at, well yes you're my half-brother, so we're really not related. Well what does that do in your own community, when staff are talking negatively about other staff, when people are stopping you on the street and going, oh what school should my kids go to? Oh you want them to go to School X. (Principal, Interview)

Are we one big happy system of schools? I don't think so. I think everybody is so busy with their own sites, I don't know whether people are really that concerned with how our sister school is doing. (Principal, Interview)

And finally, the family metaphor extended to relationships within a school, particularly around choice programs.

The regular program seemed like the poorer cousin. Everybody knew that the

sustainability of the whole school's health was largely due to the Logos program coming in. (Principal, Interview)

It's just more and more this segregation. It happens in the community and amongst the kids. I'm in the honours program, I'm in this program, and you go to that school. It creates animosity even within the building. Within a building, oh you're in 9-4, you're one of them. (Principal, Interview)

The manner in which the family metaphor was used by educational leaders provides insight into the relational dynamics within the organization and how school choice policies were enacted. The metaphor is representative of winner and losers, haves and have nots, and of an overall hierarchy among schools based on geography, division, popularity, and enrolment. In this metaphor, inequity is the norm and the overall collective responsibility to one another is minimized. Inequity as natural aligns with a market conception of society (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Ozga, 1999).

My case study provides evidence of the impacts at the local level of broader abstract ideas about choice, competition, engagement, and school improvement. The permeation of market-based policies has been noted by many researchers (Wright, 2014) as the specific and varied local material impacts of the "traveling policies of choice" have been documented (Morgan & Blackmore, 2013; Wright, 2014). However, in SRSDC, the impacts of the broader trends may be enhanced given the relative economic wealth of the majority of the SRSDC community and the lack of diversity. In other words, the impacts of the broader narratives may be aggravated by the geographic, economic, and

demographic profile of SRSDC. In SRSDC, the majority of the population are privileged from an economic perspective and there is an overall lack of diversity; therefore, it is more challenging for agents to both understand and address concerns experienced by those individuals and communities who are economically disadvantaged.

The complex work of policy-making and policy enactment must, therefore, take into account broader policy trends and ideas and how those trends intersect with the local context. In an organization where the majority of the agents and communities have relative social and economic privilege, the challenges and barriers that are experienced by families and communities who have less economic and social capital are not well known or understood. The concerns and realities for vulnerable families are invisible because of the relative privilege of the majority. This invisibility occurs on a day-to-day basis and it is reflected in the absence of consideration of these challenges in the policy process. In an organization of relative privilege, like SRSDC, it may be even more important to ensure the voices and experiences of families who are marginalized by market principles are heard and represented in the policy process.

The characteristics of CAS as an open system and a network of interconnected agents were demonstrated in the case study and the degrees have important implications for policy-making. In section four, it will argued that agents' belief systems partially structured the way the school choice game in SRSDC was played.

### **The Challenge of Site-Based Leadership**

Distributed control, rather than hierarchical control, is a key characteristic of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS). Although the superintendent is the chief education

officer in Alberta school divisions, there is little doubt that principals have a level of autonomy in their own school buildings. Furthermore, as noted in previous sections, the Alberta provincial educational restructuring in the 1990s introduced a decentralization policy direction. The introduction of site-based leadership impacted both decision-making and the degrees and levels of distributed control as site-based leadership allowed schools more autonomy in decisions about their management, that is, in the use of their human, material, and financial resources (De Grauwe, 2005). In this case study, the introduction of site-based leadership, inclusive of per student funding allocations, is entangled with the introduction and enactment of school choice policies. The policy directions are enmeshed with one another.

Principals are doing business differently than the past. It can be risky, messy, confusing, and disjointed at times. (Principal Comment, Board Minutes, 1995, p. 7)

Site-based leadership in SRSDC changed the rules so that principals had increased autonomy to develop and introduce programming that would attract students and families to their schools. The combination of site-based leadership, per student funding allocations, and school choice heightened the tensions for principals and senior leaders in terms of individual school interests versus division interests. The potential for system level implications was noted by a retiring member of the senior leadership team shortly after the introduction of site-based leadership.

You will need to keep principals' sights focused not only on what makes their school strong but on the bigger picture, that of making and keeping the

system strong... fairness and equity informed by Board policy, for all children must not be sacrificed for individual school autonomy or practices. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, August 1996, Appendix A)

The tension was further acknowledged by other interviewees.

You're in a division and you're trying to be a team player in the division and at the same time you're trying to promote your own programs in your own building. There are tensions that arise there. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The challenge between division versus school interests was noted by the Alberta Teachers' Association who highlighted potential concerns regarding the alignment of school division policies and site-based leadership (ATA, 1990). The ATA added there would need to be division monitoring to ensure school practice aligned with division policies (ATA, 1990). Although there were policies developed regarding the practice of site-based leadership in SRSDC, the practice and outcomes of this policy direction were difficult to manage. Throughout the case study, there were tensions around whether SRSDC was a "school system" or "a system of schools." Furthermore over time, there were evolutions in terms of levels and degrees of decisions that were devolved to the school principals. In Phase 4, some of the challenges associated with school choice including uneven enrolment, selection processes, and marketing strategies were seen as linked to the level of site-based decision-making and site-based leadership was constructed by senior leadership as a practice that needed to be better managed. Attempts were made to centralize some autonomy and decision-making and this was not well-received by school leaders. Overall, it is likely questionable whether central control in a

school division is even possible and renewing centralized control is likely more challenging in school divisions where site-based leadership has been implemented. In a complex adaptive system, policy interventions intended to manage choice are no longer just about school choice and programming as now any policy interventions to manage choice are intertwined with school leaders' professional autonomy and identities. I would argue that site-based leadership is an example of a ripple effect in the organization—once enacted it is difficult to reverse. Furthermore, the limits to central control has been noted in other complex adaptive systems as non-linearity, the dynamic nature and unpredictability of complex adaptive systems, seriously limits the ability to fully control (Seel, 2000). The matter of distributed control is a challenge for senior leaders and the implications for an equity-led policy agenda is discussed in the conclusion section. The challenge is to work with distributed control to advance an equity agenda.

In addition to the potential impacts on division versus school interests, this case study provides additional evidence of the need for caution around site-based leadership on two levels: motivations behind programming decisions and shaping education as a market exchange. In relation to school choice in SRSDC, interviewees questioned whether the commitment to school choice as a philosophical direction or site-based leadership was the primary motivator for the expansion of school of choice programming in SRSDC.

Site-based management created the competitive model of school of choice within SRSDC....It's the funding model though and the site-based management that I

think has really made people overly passionate about choice. (Principal, Interview)

But I will say this, and I don't know the answer to this question. Was it a student-centered approach or was it a money-centered approach? With more students you had more money, more flexibility, therefore you could do more. Just like in business, money begets money. It started to snowball and it did create a bit of a have, have-not school system because when you had full classes you had the option for an art teacher or a science teacher so you had more flexibility and that created some animosity. (Senior Leader, Interview)

It is likely the motivations around the expansion of choice were, in fact mixed; however, a second consideration in relation to site-based leadership and school choice is the fact that the per student allocation model significantly impacted how educational leaders think and speak about education. Furthermore, there is little doubt that site-based leadership, school choice, and the per-student funding model resulted in a greater focus on resource management (Bagley, 2006). Education and students have increasingly become about exchanges in the marketplace with financial considerations at the forefront of thinking and decisions.

The first questions that are asked are do we have enough money and do we have enough resources. So the education piece and the benefits of the education piece always gets lost in translation. (Principal, Interview)

The dollar follows the child so now you've set up a competition model amongst schools where they're fighting for students because they see them as money and resources coming into their school. (Principal, Interview)

It all comes back to the dollar. It's sometimes not about what's best for kids, it is how can I get the kids in my building so I can get money. (Principal, Interview)

In meetings I often say what I think and some people don't like that I say what I think. But I can't believe no one else is thinking it too. I say, look, we're making decisions based upon dollars. Oh no, I'm not, I don't do that, it's only based upon the students' best interests. I'm like, bullshit, you can't take the dollars out of your mind. They are there, even if they're in the deepest darkest recess of your hindbrain, they are there. (Principal, Interview)

Unfortunately, it's always about the money and it's always about the resources, which is really unfortunate. When I read through and I was refreshing myself on some of these things, a lot of discussion is around resourcing and budget allocations, and very little is actually spoken about in terms of education and choices for students. (Trustee, Interview)

Another leader asked whether the removal of the resource question would change the nature of the work of principals.

If the money was distributed differently, not just bums in chairs, would we work

differently? Would we think about the greater good a little bit more? (Principal, Interview)

Previous research has noted concerns about the possible detrimental impacts of site-based leadership on equity among different schools in the same system, relationships among colleagues, and financial as well as administrative transparency (De Grauwe, 2005). This case study provides evidence of these concerns particularly in relation to equity among schools and collegial relationships. Another frequently criticized aspect of decentralization is the problem of devising allocation formulae that are truly equitable (ATA, 1990). Again the complexity of devising an equitable allocation model was a continual challenge within SRSDC as there were efforts in Phases 1, 2, and 4 that focused on devising an equitable allocation model.

This case study shows evolutions in and varied attitudes toward site-based leadership over the course of the case study. However, there is little doubt that site-based leadership and financing were influential in shaping the rules by which school choice policy was enacted in SRSDC. In other words, the site-based leadership and funding models influenced what would be adaptive responses in relation to school choice. The next section explores the rules and adaptive responses in detail.

### **Policy Enactment as a Game with Adaptive Responses**

A complex adaptive system (CAS) consists of a network of agents with individual and collective interests where system behaviour arises from competition and co-operation among the agents themselves (Rhodes, 2008). Complex adaptive systems and contemporary policy analyses examines policy both as text and process. As noted in the

phase descriptions, there were significant changes to the formal procedural policies, the formal rules, over the course of the case study. A CAS framework, however, refers to the rules of the game as both formal and informal. In addition to the changes to formal policy as described in the phase descriptions, one of the most interesting facets of my research was the evolutionary nature of the “informal” rules of the organization. In terms of the informal rules, a CAS framework and the associated research notes varying rules that are constructed by agents within the organization (Keshavarz et al., 2010). There may be rules that govern aspects of agent behaviour, rules about interaction among agents and rules governing the specific actions that may be taken at particular times and/or by particular agents. In Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC), school choice enactment was often described as a “game” and the rules were fluid. Rules were constructed, interpreted, re-constructed, and re-interpreted differentially among agents based on their positions, their beliefs, the relationships among agents, and the material contexts.

In SRSDC, in addition to the family metaphor noted in a previous section, school leader behavior, policy enactment, and the balancing of individual and collective interests was discussed through the use of the game metaphor. The structure of the game was influenced by formal policies that encouraged school choice, promoted site-based leadership, and established per student funding but the nuances of the game were determined by agents in the system. Interviewees referenced the rules of the games, the rules of the game changing, parents and colleagues breaking the rules, and the need for more rules. There was an inevitability of the game expressed by many interviewees.

While my point of view, I would cringe on occasion, I understood that that system wasn't going to go away. I understood that this was how the funding game was going to be played. You have to have sympathy for a principal that's trying to protect the integrity of their school by maintaining their population by being as creative as they can within the rules to keep students in their community, in their school. (Principal, Interview)

I think it is being a realist too. If the game is there and the rules are set out and you decide you're going to play a different game, then you're going to lose, your school's going to lose, and your school community is going to lose. So yes, I'm a proponent from a pragmatic point of view. (Principal, Interview)

But sometimes in certain situations rules are put in place and rules are told to be followed, but you know because of your background that that rule might not be in the best interest of kids, so you don't really follow that rule. I think that's happening quite a bit. There's probably other rules that are in the best interest of kids that we kind of go, can I do something different to make more money? (Principal, Interview)

But it was all fair game at one point, so we played the game. I'm not sure that had much to do with the choice piece but it was an interesting piece. It was part of the culture at that time too. (Principal, Interview)

I think the trump card right now is that the principals have the authority to set their optimal enrolment limit. In reality, we can all play the game nice in the sandbox but I have the ability to set my optimum enrolment high, which allows me to take kids from other schools... I've got space, you apply, you come in, it is all held at the school level. So in essence then you're really not that much different from where we were 6 or 7 years ago. (Principal, Interview)

In accordance with a complex adaptive system, there is no evidence to suggest that a more prescriptive approach to formal policies/rules would have resulted in more consistent responses from agents. However, what is clear is that policy makers and senior leaders need to be realistic about rule stability and compliance. It is unrealistic to expect 100% compliance with the formal rules within a complex adaptive system. Furthermore, it was a widely held sentiment among interviewees that non-compliance was healthy, necessary, and inevitable from an organizational perspective.

There is a whole bunch of principals that are still doing their own thing.  
(Principal, Interview)

There's always going to be your rebel group, there's always going to be somebody that's going to push the line. That's not a bad thing, I'm not saying that's a bad thing either. (Principal, Interview)

The formal and informal rules set the context for what it constructed as adaptive in an organization. In other words, depending on the rules (both formal and informal),

adaptive responses/ game strategies emerged. Adaptive responses were fluid depending on contextual and relational factors and could not be simply predicted based on advancing either individual or collective interests. Throughout the case study, there were examples cited of competition and cooperation among schools. The complexity of adaptive responses aligns with previous research findings suggesting that both competition and co-operation between schools may occur, depending on specific local circumstances and relations (Waslander et al., 2010). However, the adaptive responses sometimes combined in such a way to produce a system effect. This section explores the system effects as well as the adaptive responses of principals, parents, and elected trustees in detail. In order to emphasize the power of the game metaphor, I intentionally use the term “game” (rather than policy context) in the remainder of the section. This use of the game term is not to minimize the importance of education but is intended to show the power of the metaphor.

**System effects: Programming impacts.** System effects, in this case programming within Suburban Urban School Division Case (SRSDC), resulted from competitive and cooperative behavior of adaptive agents within the system. The current educational programming within SRSDC was a system effect of the interactions and relationships resulting from the introduction of site-based leadership, per pupil funding allocations, parental empowerment, and the encouragement of school-choice. These policies fundamentally altered the game of educational programming and subsequently structured the “game” in the mid 1990s. In SRSDC, the game resulted in the introduction and expansion of alternative Christian programming, programming targeted toward

higher ability/highly motivated children and families at the junior and senior high schools levels, and some skepticism about the quality of choice programming.

*Alternative Christian programming.* A clear example of a changed game relating to educational programming was the introduction and expansion of alternative-Christian programming. The centralization of education funding and subsequent distribution to school divisions based on student enrolment created a material context in which it was beneficial for both private Christian schools and SRSDC to enter into partnership agreements which were previously not palatable to the school division. This example also demonstrates that cultural norms, particularly with the SCA community, had also changed in relation to trust levels with the public school division. In addition to SCA, the addition of Logos Christian programming was also possible given the change in the game and the new rules.

The expansion of alternative-Christian programming is illustrative of the longer term, and likely unintentional outcomes, of the change in rules. It's been argued that, in Alberta, the competitive market model may have unintentionally led to an increase in faith-based options (Hiemstra & Brink, 2006). The evidence from SRSDC supports that claim. In Phase 1, Logos Christian programming was introduced as an alternative program and it expanded in Phase 2. Logos enrolment data have remained consistent since 2001 with the percentage of total enrolment being 2.22% in 2001 and 2.00% in 2014. SRSDC also partnered with two formerly private Christian schools, the first in 1998 and the second in 2000. These programs have shown substantial growth throughout the case study. In 2001, 5.85% of SRSDC resident students attended an alternative-

Christian school. In 2014, this percentage had increased to 9.01%. The alternative-Christian schools enrolments also represent a high percentage of the division's non-resident student enrolment (26.48% in 2003 and 30.91% in 2014).

*Programming to attract highly motivated students and families.* In SRSDC, the introduction of school choice was also the impetus for expansion of programming for highly motivated students and families at the junior and senior high levels. The initial phase was an expansion of programming for higher ability students. The expansion started with the introduction of the NHZ charter school and the CLB system honours program. The subsequent proliferation of honours programming to other sites was a strategy for other schools to protect enrolment of their high ability students. The second phase involved sports related programming. Hockey and soccer options were introduced in Phase 2. Sports options were initially offered, and subsequently expanded, as principals responded to parental requests and implemented strategies to maintain their enrolment. Both the expansion of programming for high ability students and sports options were in response to one school starting these programs at their school. This proliferation is an example of a threshold effect in a complex adaptive system (CAS). In other words, the introduction of competition per se did not necessarily lead to changes in programming rather the competition needed to exceed a certain threshold in order to bring about an effect (Belfield & Levin, 2002; Wylie, 2006). In SRSDC, the threshold was reached at the secondary level but competition has never really evolved at the elementary level. Overall, competition effects were non-linear which provide further evidence that a CAS was operating. The pattern of competition effects also aligns with

previous research where competition between schools is more likely to have effects in highly concentrated markets such as those in the more urban areas (Waslander et al., 2010).

Although the majority of previous studies have not looked at school choice policies using a CAS conceptual framework, the programming that emerged in SRSDC aligns with previous research demonstrating that, when allowed, schools seem to try to select students on the basis of ability (e.g., West, 2006). Other studies demonstrate that schools facing competition do attempt to influence the enrolment of students offering programming to attract white, high performing students whose parents are well educated and affluent (Ball & Youdell, 2009; Lubienski, 2006; Lubienski et al., 2009; Van Zanten, 2009). Furthermore, the introduction of sports programs has also been noted in previous research. The diversification of course offerings, including sports, arts and info-graphics, are introduced as these courses are seen as having greater potential to attract students (Waslander et al., 2010).

There is certainly consistency in research findings regarding the programs of choice that arise when site-based leadership and per pupil student funding structure the game. Generally, programs that attract motivated and wealthy parents and students are introduced and expanded. It is arguable that there is a certain inevitability that these programs will emerge and expand as they are incentivized by the rules of the game.

***Skepticism about the quality of programming.*** The rules of the game have unintentionally led some SRSDC agents to question the overall quality of some choice programming, particularly programming for higher ability students. This questioning

relates to the motivation underlying the emergence of choice programs. Overall, the evidence for the expansion of choice programs initiated by school leaders in SRSDC shows mixed motivations. Although there were policies enthusiasts who initiated choice programming, the primary drivers for choice programs were pragmatic and responsive in nature. In most cases, choice programs emerged in schools with low enrolment based on catchment areas with declining enrolment or as a strategy to “protect” enrolment of high ability students. With the exception of a few key agents, most school leader interviewees were initially ambivalent about choice. However, knowledge of the mixed motivations travelled in the informal networks in the organization. Furthermore, it is important to note that for competition to have an effect on student outcomes, something within the school itself has to change (Waslander et al., 2010). In SRSDC, there has not been any evaluation of programs promoted as meeting the needs of higher ability students. Furthermore, there was no systemic tracking of students’ experiences or their learning outcomes. The lack of programming standards and evaluation coupled with the perceived driver of choice programs led to some skepticism about the quality of programming among some interviewees. This skepticism aligns with the construct of an organization as a fabrication (Ball, 2000) as schools attempt to position themselves in the market. In a fabrication, the image of specific programming becomes more important than the programming itself.

I question I guess sometimes with school choice and programming at schools, the quality of the programming. I know that we have various honours programming.

I question the quality of that programming or any of our programming that is

choice if there hasn't been development, implementation, and revisions. I'm not sure if choice programming has gone through that type of rigour. (Principal, Interview)

In addition to honours, the rigour of programming was also referenced in relation to the "sudden" emergence of Advanced Placement (AP) programming at a second high school in SC county in Phase 4. Interviewees commented on the perception in the community that the second AP program did not meet the required programming standards as the second AP programming was perceived as a competitive strategy that lacked rigour.

Part of the difficulty is that you have these important educational objectives but then someone in a position of authority comes along and says, School X needs more students. Well fine but having fake Advanced Placement programs, from what I'm hearing, what I'm saying may not be factually correct. So if you have a fake AP program to draw students, well who's served by that? (Trustee, Interview)

Programming within complex adaptive systems with limited regulation of choice follows patterns. In other words, the structure of the game supports the emergence of programming that would appeal to "selective" consumers. Programming that appeals to parents that want an advantage for their children are desired and popular. However, the case study also points to the emergence of "rumors" in informal networks that questions the quality of programming when motivations are questioned.

**Playing the game: Principals and student selection.** Public education and its

leaders espouse the ideal that public education is for *all* students regardless of background; however, school choice opens the game to the possibility of selecting students based on their level of need. School choice changes the dynamics around student selection and selectivity is one of the more controversial areas relating to school, particularly in public education. There is the ideal that public education is for all students equally but there is also the reality that students come to school with diverse needs and require different levels of resources to support their education. In an ideal world, covert and/or perceived discriminatory selection processes would not exist but principals operate in the “real” world with limited resources and schools are complex places. Although evidence of selectivity was noted in the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC), I raise caution about simplistic judgement about these practices. One school has large class sizes in honours but is then able to divert more resources to support smaller classes for students with more academic needs and/or additional services for students with learning challenges. Another school’s attendance area draws from a neighbourhood with a lower socioeconomic profile. Each school has a unique story and their stories are not always well known. Student selection must be situated in the context of the specific schools and communities.

With cautions in mind, what is clear from this case study is that student selection processes were areas that caused concern over time and policy changes were made in attempts to manage perceptions of unfairness in selection processes. Some selection processes were overt; some were covert. In terms of student selections, there are levels of tension. One layer of tension is between alternative-Christian schools and all other

schools. A second layer is the selection of students for honours program and how it relates to the approvals of boundary exemptions. These tensions create ripple effects and structure adaptive responses.

Although Christian schools are well established in SRSDC and much of the original controversy has dissipated, the selection of students remains an issue. Alternative Christian schools do not have boundaries and have program specific selection criteria and processes. Some interviewees felt that the alternative-Christian programs operated with a different set of rules than other schools. There remains a subtle undercurrent among some school leaders.

I think people still feel that yes you can be a school of choice but you need to live by our rules and have to follow the same kind of processes so that it's fair and equitable to all kids. I think there's still some perceived inequity there, whether or not it really exists. (Principal, Interview)

The honours "choice" programs that developed in Phase 1 at the junior and senior highs were designed to attract and/or retain students who had demonstrated a high level of academic aptitude. The selection of students for the various manifestations of honours programming was, therefore, not covert; however, the honours programs impacted how other boundary exemptions were viewed, and subsequently, approved at the school level in Phases 1 through 3. In other words, the introduction of honours programming had a "ripple effect" on other manifestations of school choice.

Although hesitant to be critical of colleagues' behaviour, several interviewees commented on boundary exemption selection processes. There is a perception that *some*

principals were selective in the Phase 1 through 3 boundary exemption processes.

I shouldn't say this, but principals would pick – certain students they automatically would take, other ones they would hesitate to take, and some they just would refuse to take. We all know why – just depends on their needs and their behaviors. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The thing that I do know is that there were some schools that were selective. They would interview students who wanted to come from out of area. They knew they had to accept their designated students, but if they came from out of area they'd ask to see their report card. They'd actually sometimes check in on the history of the student. (Principal, Interview)

But I guess the behavior of the student in the past, whether they were academically solid – those kinds of criteria were used as a means of selecting students. I had a very difficult time with that, because you could load your school as a principal from out of designated area with whom you wanted. That was happening. (Principal, Interview)

One principal was forthright in their intent to select the “best” students,

Based on enrolment numbers and what I wanted for Grade 7s, I started out with a general number of what I was prepared to take. If I had 75 applicants I created some piles. If I needed 35 I created a top pile and then I was weaning down. I really worked to try and find, based on report cards, the top 35. In some of my

experiences, I ended up needing more students and often it was because I lost students through the boundary exemption process to another school. So then I would be going down a little bit lower. But the majority of the students were average to above average students . . . It was a very clinical process. These are the numbers I need, let me get the best kids I can. (Principal, Interview)

Other interviewees suggested some cooperation in relation to boundary exemptions, particularly in the local SC county market as schools informally agreed not to accept boundary exemptions from a school with declining enrolment. This cooperation aligns with previous research where it has been shown that public schools will informally agree not to enroll students from outside their catchment area (Pater et al., 2009). However, it should be noted that research also suggests that co-operation is a vulnerable strategy and requires continuous mutual agreement as competitive behaviour can be decided on by an individual school and has a tendency to spread with time (Waslander et al., 2010). In SRSDC, there was a tentative nature to the cooperation among principals in SC county, particularly as principals changed.

Overall, there were two motivations at play in student selection processes in SRSDC that align with previous research in Sweden (Pater et al., 2009), in New Zealand (Ladd & Fiske, 2003; Wylie, 2006), and in various European countries (Ball & Maroy, 2009; Van Zanten, 2009). First, when the number of applicants exceeds the number of places and school leaders are in a position to select students they are more likely to select students who are white, perform well, have well-educated parents and come from affluent backgrounds as the most desirable students (Ball & Youdell, 2009; Lubienski, 2006;

Lubienski et al., 2009; Van Zanten, 2009). The second motivation noted by previous research is that schools will try to secure a reasonably predictable number of entrants as predictability greatly favours school planning (Waslander et al., 2010)

The case study findings do not support that principals, when given the authority, will only select motivated and higher ability students. One interviewer noted an unpredictability and randomness to principal's decisions.

It was a time when the high school had lots of kids requesting boundary exemptions to come and there was no clear process. There was no clear sense of why a child would be accepted and why a child would be not accepted. I saw the principal kind of do the yes, no, maybe, random piles. Sometimes they were looked at, sometimes it was take the good kids. Sometimes it was that's a project I think we could help that child so they should come here. But it was really random. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Furthermore, it was my experience working with students presenting with behavioural challenges that my principal colleagues were consistently agreeable to grant a boundary exemption for a student if I advocated on the student's behalf.

Another area of student selection that was used strategically by school principals was the annual approval of boundary exemptions. In Phases 1 through 3, boundary exemptions were reviewed on an annual basis and it was within the principal's discretion to extend or reject any subsequent exemption renewals. In practice, this annual renewal was sometimes used as leverage to try and secure student and family cooperation with academic and behaviour expectations. In Phase 4, the annual renewal was removed and

students were granted an exemption until they were changing schools thus, removing any annual selection process.

If you did accept one of those students that became problematic, the next year you'd say, no we don't want you anymore. Again, I don't think that's fair. If you're accepting a student, you're accepting a student and it's a package deal . . . I just felt that was an inappropriate way to deal with people. I don't think you should ever be able to tell somebody that you're in this year and then I don't like the way you've performed this year so go back to your other school. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Overall, the operation of student selection in SRSDC presents a complex picture. In some ways, the operation of school selection processes in SRSDC aligns with previous research noting covert selection processes, maneuvering behind the scenes, arguments among schools and clashes of policies (Pearce & Gordon, 2005). In other ways, there was cooperation among schools to support individual students and schools with lower enrolment. Furthermore, student selection is only one aspect; to fully appreciate the complexity of the impacts of school choice, theorists must also understand how principals distribute resources within their school. However, it is also reasonable to state that from a pragmatic perspective given the rules and resource constraints, selectivity is an adaptive response for school leaders.

**Playing the game: Marketing and school promotion.** A research finding and adaptive response that is consistent across different contexts is that schools experiencing competition will spend more time, energy, and money on school promotion and

marketing (Lubienski, 2006). This behaviour has been documented in New Zealand (Wylie, 2006), Chile (Garces, 2009) and the United Kingdom (Bagley, 2006). Aligning with previous research, marketing and school promotion was a strategy used throughout the case study. In Phases 1 and 2, school principals, although sometimes reluctantly, engaged in school promotion and marketing efforts. Over time, policies evolved in efforts to manage student recruiting and school promotion. Evidence of the adaptive responses among principals was evident in Phase 4 when senior leaders' expected school leaders to minimize school promotion and there was a ban on open houses as a school promotion strategy. These formal attempts to change school promotion and marketing resulted in various adaptive responses and unintended relational consequences.

What happened is it goes underground. People are giving tours of schools, people are promoting. They're using Twitter, they're using Facebook, their coaches are phoning kids, and it's gone completely underground. (Principal, Interview)

I think the worst part, what has happened is the relationship between the two high schools is rather toxic right now. I think it pits schools against schools. I've dealt with way too many rumors and innuendoes that tours were being given. We had parents phone us and say they'd had a tour of School A. We'd phone over, they'd say no they didn't do any tours. So it really poisons the relationship between the two schools, and it's not the administration that's doing that. (Principal, Interview)

We get these colleagues, our fellow leaders, who hold their cards close to their chest and wait till the last minute to share the information. What are we doing to each other? Principal A looks at Principal B's website and says, you can't put that on your website because you're advertising for your school. Yes I am, I am celebrating my school, that's what we do on websites. Yet the other school sees it as you're trying to draw my kids. So we can't even celebrate our good now because then it's looking like we're trying to take away from someone else. (Principal, Interview)

Research in other geographic regions note that school leaders will shift from promotion and marketing to public relations by deliberately working on good relations with the (local) media so that they provide favourable reports about the school (Wilson, 2004). This strategy was noted by several interviewees.

I think we're still in this go to your neighborhood school, so that's the headset we want to promote. All of our schools are wonderful schools, all of our principals are visionary leaders, so you're not going to go wrong. But I think you have to realize that people are not stupid. People don't buy that bill of goods necessarily . . . the people that are looking for schools are pretty aware of what schools are offering. That's not just through hearsay or gossip, but by coming into the school, by reading the newspapers, by just being informed as far as what's happening in the community. (Principal, Interview)

In a complex adaptive system, creating policies that prohibit advertising and open houses is insufficient to deter and/or manage school promotion efforts. Whether schools

wish to celebrate their school and their students' achievement or encourage students to attend, it is nonetheless difficult, if not impossible, within a system with distributed control to manage not only school staff behavior but also community perceptions. In the age of social media and the reality of informal networks, marketing precludes a simplistic technical solution. The per-pupil funding allocation and site-based leadership remain a strong determinant of how the game is played.

**Playing the game: Parents as strategic agents in the game.** The game of choice is not limited to school leaders; individual parents, and informal and formal parent groups are adaptive agents in the system and active choosers play the game. For active choosers, the game involves school selection, securing their preferred school, and advocating for policies that support choice.

School choice proponents assume that parents are rational agents who rely on objective information in their selection processes. However, my research and the research literature present a far more complex picture. The evidence gathered in this case study aligns with previous research; specifically, parents tend to rely on school reputations rather than standard academic published material when choosing a school. The importance of reputation has been noted across countries, including the United States (Bell, 2009; Howell, 2006; Lacireno-Pacquet & Brantley, 2008; Wolf, 2009), New Zealand (Wylie, 2006), Netherlands (Denessen, Driessena & Slegers, 2005), and France (Van Zanten, 2002). In SRSDC, there was direct evidence from active choosers that schools' reputations were key considerations when choosing schools (e.g., there seem to be some rumors of schools with a bad reputation, some schools have bad reputations, one

school has an undeserving reputation that may be impacting enrolment [SRSDC Reimagining Report, 2013, p. 6, 8, and 168]). The importance of reputation in the choice process was also noted by several interviewees.

But they're definitely influenced by things like the extracurricular pieces, the outward face of that school in terms of community reputation. (Senior Leader, Interview)

My first exposure to it was that this was something that really seemed to be a popularity choice. Working at the junior high level in this jurisdiction, schools that had positive reputations or specialized programs had a lot of students who were applying to come to those schools. (Principal, Interview)

In addition the reputation, parents also rely on informal social networks as an important strategy in both choosing a school and, in the case of SRSDC, securing their school of choice.

I think that every parent wants to know that their child is going to be safe and cared for. Sometimes it's just a feel in a building. *You'll hear parents talk about that* – when I walked in there was this feeling that I was going to be okay about leaving my child here. Some people make choices just strictly around that. I know some that picked just because of the principal's philosophy. (Trustee, Interview)

*There was not due attention or consideration given to the fact that people talk. I*

know people talk about me in the school community. All it takes is a first, second, third, fourth person to go through the appeal process and get it granted and start sharing about what they did. (Trustee, Interview)

So we saw a lot of creative writing. *Word got out on the street about bullying; get the word bullying in there.* (Principal, Interview)

The reliance on social networks as an important source of information is, again, consistent with previous research in this area as people share experiences, opinions, and advice (Goldring & Phillips, 2008; Lacireno-Pacquet & Brantley, 2008; Reinoso, 2008). Furthermore, research also shows that information shared in social networks plays a part in collective choice actions, such as seeking joint access to a school so that parents know prospective classmates and their parents (Reinoso, 2008). The tendency for collective choice decisions was anecdotally shared by interviewees as well.

Once active choosers select their preferred school, studies have found that parents engage in strategic behaviour (Nogueira, 2010) as they try to secure their school of choice. The strategic behaviors of parents are consistent across geographic areas and have been noted in several countries including the United Kingdom (Croft, 2004), New Zealand (Waslander & Thrupp, 1995), United States (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2007; Reay, 2004), Spain (Reinoso, 2008), Wales (Taylor, 2009), and Beijing, China (Lai, Sadoulet, & de Janvry, 2009). Furthermore, studies have found that parents engage in strategic behavior to secure a choice even in school systems where parents are not supposed to actively choose (Waslander et al., 2010). The research noted above

provides evidence that parents who find their way around rules and regulations are more often well educated, more affluent, and use strategies that include lying about their home addresses or using addresses of friends and family. This case study revealed findings that align with this previous research. SRSDC active choosers engaged in strategic behaviour to secure enrolment in their school or program of choice. Strategic behaviour was more evident during the restrictive choice period in Phase 4 but similar behaviour was noted by principals in Phases 1 through 3. In terms of strategic behaviour, parents were reported to employ strategies to avoid the boundary exemption process and manipulate the boundary exemption rules to secure their preference. Interviewees referenced parents providing a false address, a grandparent's address, or a rental property address on registration forms in order to avoid the boundary exemption process and enroll in their preferred school.

This case study also showed the adaptability of parents. Parents will adapt to changing rules relating to school choice. In Phase 4, when "open houses" were banned, parents demonstrated creativity and were strategic in finding ways to gain access to schools.

Parents have found their way around it. They're crafty. Some of the parents will start, let's say their child is in Grade 5, they'll go to the parent information night which of course is very well advertised at the junior high, happens at senior high too. They'll come out a year or 2 in advance, depending on which schools they want to check out, and they'll come to the info night. We don't have bouncers at the door, they come in, they check out the school, they're getting their open

house, they're getting the information they want and they'll make their decision when the time comes. (Trustee, Interview)

I know people will come here after school when there's a basketball game on and there's 300 people in the gym and they're not here to watch basketball, they're here to see the school. So they're coming anyway. (Principal, Interview)

Certainly parent school selection processes show evidence of informal feedback loops in action and these feedback loops pose challenges for educational leaders. Specifically, relying on formal and crafted communication messages regarding choice policies or schools is likely to lead to disappointing policy outcomes. An erroneous assumption is that parents will act differently when additional information on schools is made available and that information can overcome under-enrolment or imbalanced enrolment across a division. Furthermore, it is certainly a challenge for principals of schools with bad reputations as these sorts of reputations are not always accurate and they tend to persist over long periods of time despite actions taken by schools (Bell, 2009; Gorard, 1999).

Finally, from a parent perspective, the game of choosing a school is most often about choosing what is best for them and their child. The case study provides evidence that among active choosers self-interest is prioritized over collective interest and responsibility.

I want to go to that school because it'll be better for my kids. There'll be better children and they can go to university and they'll make more money. And you

know what, that's the way it is. It's like they'll have better friends there.

(Principal, Interview)

I think that if you were to ask people to look at an education system from on high, most would say we want education to be equitable, we want every child to have the opportunity that the other child has. When we put choice into the hands of a parent and they're looking at their child that goes out the window. (Principal, Interview)

The struggle between individual versus collective interests was noted by some leaders in relation to their decision-making as parents. Some interviewees' perspectives on choice from a parent and an educational perspective were congruent; others were not.

I was not a proponent of school of choice as an employee, however as a parent I was. (Principal, Interview)

For my children I wanted what's best for my child at the expense of the rest of the community. I made that choice so I understand how enticing it is for parents to make a choice for the best of their children. (Principal, Interview)

The privileging of self-interest noted in my research aligns with previous research findings that parents look for an "advantage" for their children" (Bosetti, O'Reilly, Gereluk, & Sande, 1998) as well as research describing increasing anxiety among middle-class parents regarding their ability to maintain their place in society and secure educational advantage for their children (Bosetti & Pyryt, 2007). Overall, the evidence

from the case study aligns with previous research that more advantaged parents, positioned by policies of choice, have the most knowledge and resources to navigate the school and will often work within and around that system to make their school choices (Bifulco et al., 2009; Morgan & Blackmore, 2013; Wells & Roda, 2009).

**Playing the game: Groups of parents as strategic agents shaping the game.**

Research suggests that parents are becoming more demanding to ensure that their children have privileged access to the best schools and programs (OECD, 2006). Throughout the course of the case study, the “power” of parents with high levels of social, economic, and political capital of parents and their willingness to use that influence to shape school choice policy directions were evident. There were numerous examples where parents demonstrated knowledge of provincial “choice” policy and employed strong advocacy skills to secure their preferred option: New Horizons School (February 1995), Mundare Charter School proposal to the Minister of Education (August 1998), opening of the Logos program (May 1997), French Immersion senior high location maintained in rural SC county (May 1999), maintaining operation of MIN school (May 2003), and reversal of boundary exemption restrictions (January 2013). The molding of choice policy that meets individual interests above the common good has been noted by Miller-Kahn and Smith (2001).

An important lesson from the case study emerges from the parent responses to choice restrictions to Phase 4. The level and intensity of political advocacy were high and unanticipated by senior leadership. Active choosers were not simply willing to accept a policy change.

The *School Act* says that if there is room available then the parents and child have a right to choice. So we had a number of schools that couldn't say no because they had the space to accommodate, so therefore parents were entitled to Section 45. Then, of course, it just spread after that. People found out and it went through the grapevine and everybody just got their lawyers or a lawyer friend to write it up. (Trustee, Interview)

Overall, the education reforms over the last number of years were partially intended to provide parents with more opportunities to be involved in their children's education (Scott, 2013). Parents, by both the formal and informal rules, are a more active part of the game. School divisions and schools were, and are, expected to engage parents in a more direct way as evidenced by the School Council regulation. The role of parents in shaping policy and programming directions is a consistent, and lingering, tension in SRSDC.

I intend to be and have always been rather cynical about that whole process. I think the school of choice alternative program direction is parent driven, not necessarily education need of kids. (Trustee, Interview)

Parents are running our school system, parents are ruling the roost. I think now we started it and it's pretty hard to go backwards. (Principal, Interview)

I think we have to defer to parents' judgment more often than we do. I've often said to a parent on a programming issue within a school, this is what my

recommendation is. However, I'm not going to tell you, you have to do this. I will, however, put in our files that our recommendation was this. But if this is what you want to do and this is where you want to go, then I'm going to go along with it. More often than not, it works. We don't have all the answers. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Within SRSDC, there are many reasons underlying the tensions around parental involvement, including the privileging of professional expertise, protectionism related to decision-making, and concerns regarding collective impacts when parents shape the game in their specific interests. Research supports the need for a cautious approach. Parental engagement was found to address individual needs and the needs of a particular school rather than the collective or systemic change that was required to address stratification and exclusions in a large school district (Berends & Zottola, 2009; Popkewitz 2000; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, Mintrom, & Roch, 1997). In addition, other research notes there are parents and students who find themselves absent from the vision of empowerment through school choice (Scott, 2013). Furthermore, it has been noted that when parents' roles in school choice focuses on individual agency and competition, it reinforces notions of equality that obscure structural inequities and contributes to the erosion of public education as a common good (Beal & Hendry, 2012). Finally, the SRSDC case evidence aligns with previous research noting that even when the populations affected by school choice policies are relatively homogenous in terms of its class and ethnic background, and concerns about creaming and other stratifying effects are less pronounced, school choice can both support and impede parental engagement,

and the outcomes of such engagement, when it is practiced, are not always positive for the individual children involved or for the district community (McGinn & Ben-Porath, 2014). In reality, some parents are now active players in the game. Important questions arise: How do school division leaders balance parental expectations for their individual children with the collective interests of *all* children? How do school division leaders balance and navigate the demands of parents with economic and political capital with the needs of the often, more silent, vulnerable families? Can the rules be shaped to encourage more collective responsibility?

### **Playing the game: The Board of Trustees**

The Board of Trustees shall provide overall direction and leadership to the Division and is accountable for the provision of appropriate educational services and programs to resident students within the Division, in keeping with the requirements of government legislation and the values of the electorate. (SRSDC website, n. d.)

Elected school boards have a formal role as prescribed by provincial legislation. Legislation provides the formal rules of the game governing the Board's role in the provision of educational services and programs. However, within a complex adaptive system (CAS), informal rules are as important. What informal rules shape what are appropriate educational services and programs for elected officials? This case study demonstrated several key findings: Informal rules are omnipresent as formal rules were not consistently followed by provincial politicians, trustees navigate the informal and formal rules of the provincial education system, trustees are responsive to provincial

politicians and politically active parents, re-electability is a significant part of the game for trustees, and the rhetoric around efficiency is part of the game.

The dynamics between school boards trustees and provincial politicians are interesting as many local trustees have aspirations to greater political power and/or higher political office. Trustees may resent provincial interference but they typically want to remain on the “good” side of provincial politicians and the SRSDC Board typically deferred to the province’s stated preferences. There were multiple examples of provincial interference at the local level throughout the course of the case study: approval of the MUN Charter School in 1997–1998, the expectation to re-consider the partnership with NHZ Charter School in 1999–2000, and the request to find a location for NHZ Charter school in 2007. Ministerial interference was not based on official provincial policy, such as the *School Act*, but instead appeared to be related to appeasing constituents or advocacy groups and/or supporting the success of the province’s philosophical direction around school choice.

Even when the Board and senior leadership aspired to strategic planning and “objective” decision-making, they were operating within the “rules” of the provincial political context and were subject to the informal rules of provincial politicians. The informal rules manifested in provincial political interference at the local level. The power of local constituents at the provincial level was clearly evident in events surrounding the MUN Charter School. In this situation, the SRSDC Board followed their school closure policy and made a difficult decision that would improve the overall efficiency of the organization. The Minister of Education upheld the Board’s decision

but MUN community members were not satisfied.

That's why they went after the big hitters, the people that they know would make political impact. As you probably recognize yourself, in a rural community they go straight to the top. Whatever political clout they can access, they will, and quite quickly too. (Central Services Leader, Interview)

That situation at MUN led to a charter school again springing up, which I thought was very bad form on the part of the current minister of education . . . From time to time, the province, in my opinion, oversteps its bounds and does dumb things, and that's where individual MLAs and ministers do things for which they cannot be held accountable. That's the problem I have with that. I believe in democracy at the local level, I believe in democracy at the provincial level for provincial aspects. (Senior Leader, Interview)

The charter school's approval did not follow formal process, did not meet the parameters of the *School Act*, and did not meet the goal of Alberta Education to achieve efficiency. The charter school was approved solely based on political influence. Although the charter school only operated for 1 year, the political influence of this community was once again evident in the announcement and building of a MUN replacement school. The MUN school, a kindergarten through Grade 8 school for less than 200 students, officially opened in the spring of 2015.

This case study also illustrated how the Board and provincial politicians were responsive to the power and influence of advocacy groups - specifically advocates for

alternative-Christian education. The approval of the SCA partnership school (where a significant portion of the required capital was donated by members of the church community) was one such example.

Part of the issue is what is the slant of some of the people at Alberta Education, i.e. if their kids went to private Christian schools. But more is that for the number of people, both the home education lobby and the Christian school lobby, they have incredible power. (Trustee, Interview)

The approval of the partnership school did not follow Alberta infrastructure rules and, in fact, was described as “capital queue jumping” (Trustee, Interview). One could argue that the approval of the partnership school was beneficial to SRSDC on the whole and to the alternative Christian school community in particular, but what did the approval mean for older schools that have been on the requested modernization list for 15 years? What does capital queue jumping mean for that community? In an organizational context where the equity of alternative-Christian schools was an existing concern, what did the Board and senior leadership’s support mean for the equity of *all* SRSDC students and communities? Whether intentional or not, it is difficult not to conclude that the Board and senior leadership’s support for the project further normalized privilege for the politically and economically powerful. However, the rules are set up to favour the powerful so pragmatically, is a principled and purist position feasible in the game?

The Christian programs really do seem to have a favored place in SRSDC. I think that’s wrong. I thought it was wrong before I was trustee. The Superintendent was able to convince me through conversations with the Board that in the end

those kids, if we're a student centered organization system that those kids were better off being a part of SRSDC than being at a private school. I agree with him entirely on that, but it's not the whole answer. I don't know what the whole answer is. (Trustee, Interview)

For the Board, part of the game was re-electability and this was most clearly illustrated in school closure decisions.

They all have the goal to be re-elected, so they want to be liked. So even if you tell them and explain all this, which we did in all those school closure meetings. We went through it, the rationale, the logic for every one of these things, and it didn't matter. You may as well talk to the wall, because they want to be re-elected. (Senior Leader, Interview)

School X was the one that came to mind where when it came to vote only one person supported the closure even though two or three of them constantly agreed with us until they found out they were going to lose the vote and then they changed their vote. (Senior Leader, Interview)

Frankly I've heard trustees say, I will never vote to close a school. That's like a judge saying, I am never going to convict someone of soliciting. You can't do that. (Trustee, Interview)

Finally, talking about efficiency and improving efficiency were part of the game at the Board table. One of the claims made by school choice policy proponents is that

these policies will result in a more efficient education system. Research is mixed on whether school choice and market principles increase or decrease efficiency (Bifulco et al., 2009; Chakrabarti, 2008; Hoxby, 2000) and the overall the effects of market mechanisms on efficiency are inconclusive (Waslander et al., 2010). Although financial analysis was not conducted as a part of my research and therefore is not possible to state whether choice policies increased or decreased the overall efficiency of operations in SRSDC, what is clear is the drive toward efficiency was part of the game. In other words, it is reasonable to claim that the drive to achieve the maximization of educational results given resource constraints (Belfield & Levin, 2005) was often at the forefront in SRSDC when *considering* policy and practice changes. Studies of attendance and enrolment patterns, school boundary reviews, school and program closures, and transportation reviews and route optimizations were frequently conducted in attempts to find operational efficiencies. Division results reports using measures such as the cost per student, enrolment increases, and utilization rates are suggestive of *consideration*, but not primacy of, efficiency. Finally, it was clear from Phase 1 onward that a consistent tension at the Board level was student transportation and there was evidence to suggest that school choice negatively impacted the efficiency of the transportation system.

However, throughout the case study, although the Board purportedly aspired to govern an efficient school division, many of their decisions reflect compromised positions with respect to efficiency (e.g., transporting students who choose to attend a non-designated school despite not having a statutory obligation to do so, voting to maintain smaller rural schools that were in close proximity to other SRSDC schools,

grandfathering students when school boundaries were changed which mitigated the efficiency impacts of boundary changes, and minimally altering school boundaries). The game of governance requires that the Board *seek* to find efficiencies. The need for efficiency was often used in a rhetorical sense to justify various review processes (e.g., school closures and boundary reviews) but efficiency often seemed to factor minimally in the Board's final decisions. In the end, aligning board decisions with the positions of parent advocacy groups garnered more Board support than efficient operations. This "reality" leads one to question whether the "reviews" that were directed by the Board as a means to find efficiencies were, in fact, an efficient use of people's time and resources.

### **Inequity as an Emergent Property**

The principle of emergent properties of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) provides a mechanism to describe how school choice policies partially constructed what equity means and how it is operationalized in Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC). Specifically, it is argued that school choice, site-based leadership, the funding models, parent advocacy, and leadership are interconnected and interacted in a manner over the course of the case study that resulted in significant equity implications: SRSDC emerged as a more inequitable system in relation to equity of access at the individual level; in SRSDC equity was, and is, most often constituted, defined, and judged at a group level, and specifically equity among schools; and equity was, and is, reduced to economic terms rather than deeper notions of justice. There are no indications that these equity implications were intentional. In fact, equity was frequently referenced as a

desired goal/characteristic of the organization. Furthermore, the equity implications are not meant to be attributed to flawed judgment of an individual leader or the SRSDC community. Rather, inequity, as an emergent property and its unexpectedness is a product of mechanisms that was set in motion “ex post” by the policies themselves (van der Steen et al., 2013). Furthermore, in CAS, outcomes and effects of inputs are considered the effect of complex, interrelated interactions between many different elements of the system, in relations that are often instable, emergent, varying and can, therefore, hardly be predicted—or only very limitedly (van der Steen et al., 2013). The equity implications emerged as the result of varying cumulative effects of concrete and technical policy decisions and represent an example of how the concrete can impact the abstract (De Wolf & Holvoet, 2005). However, the evidence supports the need for increased vigilance about equity implications of school choice policy and practice.

**Equitable access.** Advocates for school choice policies argue that school choice will lead to more equitable access to higher quality education for all students while opponents argue that it leads to increased levels of segregation/stratification. It is important to note that school choice policies are not the only factor related to segregation between schools. Zoning and the selection policies of schools, regional and urban planning, and choice of residence all impact the levels of segregation (Archbald, 2004; Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002; Taylor, 2009; Urquiola, 2005). However, in a large scale review of research, Waslander et al. (2010) conclude that there was evidence of overall increased school segregation across contexts when comparing very different choice regimes. Furthermore, choice regimes bear a risk of increasing

segregation between schools in terms of ethnic, socio-economic, and ability segregation (Waslander et al., 2010). In addition, specific studies show that both ethnic and socio-economic school segregation were found to increase after the introduction of open enrolment in the United Kingdom (Allen, 2007; Reay, 2004) and New Zealand (Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Woodfield & Gunby, 2003). The evidence from Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) demonstrates that both horizontal and vertical stratification and segregation increased over the course of case study.

Horizontal segregation or the degree to which students from different socio-economic backgrounds are distributed unequally among schools (Willms, 2010) relates to individual access to SRSDC alternative and school based programming and choice through boundary exemptions. Horizontal segregation relates to the concept of equitable access at the individual level. In determining equitable access, previous research highlights the importance of examining fees, parent information and costs, types of choice programming, and additional complementary policies (Bell, 2009; Ben-Porath, 2009; Cobb et al., 2009; Cobb & Glass, 2009; Holme, 2002; Holme & Richards, 2009; Musset, 2012).

There is a degree of horizontal segregation that occurs through attendance areas and the economic profile of neighbourhoods. However, several of SRSDC choice programs, both school-based and alternative programs, stratify school and program enrolment based, not only on interest or belief system, but also on economic capital. Sport options, such as hockey and soccer, and the alternative Christian schools, levy fees in the range of \$995 to \$1,360 per child per year. These fees are in addition to public

school fees (such as learning resource fees) and transportation fees. Families' abilities to access alternative-Christian schools and sports programming are certainly, at least partially, related to their ability to "pay" for these choices. Given the enrolment growth in these programs, it is reasonable to conclude that horizontal segregation has increased through SRSDC alternative programs. This horizontal segregation also exacerbates the structural inequities among schools when you take into consideration the amount of fees collected (e.g., One of the SRSDC alternative Christian programs collected over \$1.5 million dollars in alternative programs fees [School X Society website, n .d.]) as well as the fundraising potential of the schools at which the majority of families are from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

In terms of choosing a school through the boundary exemption process, over the course of the case study, the capacity to participate in these choice opportunities has also become increasingly limited by social and economic capital. In Phase 1, choice through the boundary exemption request process, including the timelines and effort required, did not significantly advantage families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The application form was a one-page form requiring a two to three line explanation of the request and the timeframe was flexible. In Phases 2 and 3, the process was similar but there were shifts to earlier request deadlines. However, the process changed considerably in Phase 4. When choice was restricted in phase 4, the social capital needed to secure a boundary exemption was increased. The first stage included tighter and earlier deadlines, the requirement to meet with the designated principal, and the need to justify the reasons. These additional requirements likely marginalized families from lower socio-economic

backgrounds. The final manifestation in Phase 4, which does not include a rationale, still requires active engagement of parents to meet early deadlines. During school transitions, families need to be aware of their designated school and make a boundary exemption request by early March, which is a date earlier than natural timelines around school transitions (e.g., after spring break). Furthermore, rhetoric around the value of attending your designated school has increased and attending your designated school is actively promoted and encouraged through newsletters and websites. The term “school of choice” has been replaced by “non-designated school.” Families from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to challenge and/or consider alternatives to the rhetoric. Secondly, the ability to access choice through boundary exemptions has also been impacted by transportation availability and fees. In Phase 1, although student transportation was not guaranteed, Board documents reveal that every effort was made to accommodate school of choice busing. Secondly, there was no school of choice busing fee levied. A school of choice fee was introduced in 2004 and these fees increased in Phases 3 and 4. Economically, choice, through a boundary exemption, has become less accessible for more families.

The level of, and increases in, horizontal inequity are not generally considered problematic in SRSDC. As noted in the demographic profile of SRSDC, the majority of families in the school division have high economic and social capital. There are certainly regional disparities between urban and rural and relative areas of economic hardship within the more urban areas; however, as was outlined throughout the phases, there was not significant consideration of families’ differential capacity to access school choice. In

fact, I would argue that the inequities of families and students' abilities to access choice are mostly invisible issues. In addition to the policy changes, the majority of interviewees did not reference the economic or social capital needed to access choice within SRSDC. Only five of the 29 interviewees referenced inequities of school choice policies at the level of the individual student and family as problematic.

What worries me a lot with public education is that the affluent are more able to access programming and choice. People that are not affluent have not usually been highly educated so they don't know how to even access that information.

(Principal, Interview)

Well more equitable as between programs, less equitable between income levels.

(Trustee, Interview)

Schools of choice benefit those who can access it – those people with economic capital get to choose. Cost is prohibitive for some. Some people don't have economic capital and there are programs within our district that are pricey. The soccer program is pricey, the hockey program is pricey, [and] SCA is pricey.

Some of these schools of choice are not accessible to some. Even people that are choosing now, I have people that could not afford the busing to bus their children to School A so they're coming to School B. Other families have the option to make a choice because they have the economic capital to make a choice. So we're discriminating in some ways against those who have and those who have

not. (Principal, Interview)

Well I'll tell you what, you know who else suffers when you have programs of choice? Our marginalized children, your children in care don't have a choice. They have no choice. They have to go to a designated school, they never have an opportunity to have a choice. That really frustrates me too because some of these kids have talents that they could benefit from a school of choice, and then they don't have a school of choice. (Principal, Interview)

When I was making my notes I said, it is a have and have-not choice. If you have, you choose, if you have not, you don't choose. (Principal, Interview)

One interviewee specifically stated that the economic capital required to access some programs was not problematic.

So if a group of like-minded parents really want that program and they're willing to pay an extra cost, whatever's involved, it's wonderful. (Principal, Interview)

Why is horizontal inequity at the individual level not problematized among SRSDC school leaders? There were three rationales offered by interviewees: the lack of diversity in SRSDC schools, the relative privilege of the urban areas and school leaders, and the tendency to have a myopic focus on school-specific issues. These positions align with research and theories arguing that education is considered an "apolitical" endeavour with leaders often focused on pragmatic over substantive considerations (Brighthouse, 2000).

I don't think that our leadership is ready for those discussions. I don't think they want to have those discussions. Maybe there's a few, but most really just want their school to do really well and they want to have as many kids as possible come to their school. Those broader issues are not even on the radar. It has never been discussed at leadership. (Principal, Interview)

If your school does not have diversity, like even if it's on the less affluent side, if they're all less affluent you do not know the difference or you do not see the difference between people that are affluent and not affluent in the way that they access information, the way that they're engaged with their education, the way that they're engaged with schooling, that kind of thing. You don't see that unless you have diversity, unless you have people that are very much into education and changing education to people that can hardly put food on the table and get their kid to school. So unless you see the diversity you don't really understand it. So our leaders, we have very homogeneous groupings of schools on both ends of the spectrum. That's why I don't believe we engage in that type of conversation. There's also that idea within our leadership group that it's not our responsibility. We're here to work with our staff, we're here to work with kids, but that's not our responsibility. (Principal, Interview)

In terms of segregation and equitable access and experience, a second level of consideration is the vertical segregation of students or the degree to which students are streamed into particular schools and programs (Willms, 2010). In SRSDC, the evidence

suggests that school choice policies in SRSDC have increased not only the vertical segregation of students but has also increased the perceived “value” of vertical segregation, particularly in the parent community. Parents perceive honours programs, sports programs, and Christian programming not simply as academic programs but as programs that will lead to better and more positive peer relationships. Unlike, the relative absence of concern regarding horizontal inequity noted earlier, a consistent theme, among many interviewees, in terms of school choice policy outcomes in SRSDC, is concern about the vertical segregation of students. This may be because the impacts of vertical segregation are more visible in the day-to-day realities of school life. Many interviewees quoted the “elitism” that surrounds specific programs. Furthermore, many interviewees expressed concern about the impacts of choice programming and the lack of diversity in SRSDC schools.

I just think the public education system is disadvantaged when you siphon off bunches of kids, groups of children for any reason, and that it diminishes what the public education system can do. (Trustee, Interview)

It’s difficult, because when you lose kids to honours [programs] often that’s skimming off those kids that are really capable. All kids would benefit from a challenging learning environment, but when you take off those ones that are really strong academic role models for their peers, you lose that high quality education base at your own school too. (Principal, Interview)

So all of a sudden that school is known for that program and doesn't contain that general mix of students anymore and becomes more of that special group or elitist, whatever you want to call it. So those are some of the comments and some undertones. (Central Services Leader, Interview)

You take out all of these exceptional students or students with different religious beliefs, taking them out, putting them in another school, and you leave us with a very homogeneous grouping with very little diversity, and that isn't in the best interest of our community in my opinion. (Principal, Interview)

But when you take out those high flyer learners, those high flyer creative or athletic people, you lose something. You take out all those good religious children, you lose diversity. (Principal, Interview)

Interviewees who had experience in "less preferred" schools or programs described the students adopting the school's or program's identity.

So morale was poor, teachers openly talked to students that we were a poor school. I told them not to do that anymore – don't tell the kids we're poor. So kids would say, oh we're the poor school and we don't have anything. Perception becomes reality, so that's the discourse in the town, that's the poor school, less capable kids, that sort of thing. (Principal, Interview)

But I also see that sometimes there's a perception that if a school has a specific

program, and that's why the parents are going there, that that takes over the school culture....I think sometimes the students in the school see that program as being the "have" program and they're left out as the "have-nots", and all the money in the school or all the resources in the school go towards making that a fantastic program. (Central Services Leader, Interview)

In summary, school choice impacts equity because these policies impact where children attend schools and policies may serve to segregate or integrate individuals and/or groups of children. Overall, the evidence suggests that there have been increases in both horizontal and vertical segregation in SRSDC. Concomitantly there has been a decrease in the equity of access to choice opportunities at the individual level. Selection criteria, increases in fees, and complexities of processes have negatively impacted equity of access and have likely resulted in more internal homogeneity in schools (Reich, 2008). Looking at the SRSDC policy outcomes from the perspective of individual equitable access, inequity has increased. The findings from my research align with previous research: Research noting an intersection between school choice policies and class-based discourses (Apple, 2004; Ball & Lund, 2010; Bosetti, 2004; Gewirtz et al., 1995; Pearce & Gordon, 2005; Woolman & Fleisch, 2006), research arguing that school choice furthers social fragmentation and enhances a two-tiered education system (Gewirtz et al., 1995), and research demonstrating that school choice secures middle class advantage (Ball, 2003).

There is ample research suggesting the formal rules and mechanisms that should be considered when school choice policies are informed by concerns for equitable access

(Mussett, 2012; Poder, Kerem, & Lauri, 2013). The rules need to shift to ensure disadvantaged students are attractive to high quality schools. Procedural policies to support equity can include the provision of financial incentives to schools that enroll low performing and disadvantaged students and making funding strategies responsive to students' and schools' needs. The second level of procedural policies includes raising awareness for all families, improving disadvantaged families' access to information about schools, and actively supporting them to make better-informed choices. Third, transportation fees to a school of choice should not be a barrier for disadvantaged families. Finally, continued attention to selection mechanisms that schools can employ (e.g., criteria for admission, time of registration, additional fees) is needed. These are the formal rules that support equity; however, also clear from this case study is the need for attention to the informal rules. Working to shape the informal rules is covered in the conclusion chapter.

**Equity among schools.** If policies and practices have resulted in decreases in equity of access for individuals over the case study and this is not identified as a concern, what does this mean for “equity” in SRSDC? In official SRSDC Board documents, equity was at the forefront as a purported motivating force throughout the four phases of the case study. It was consistently referenced in SRSDC’s Strategic Education Plans and became a primary focus in the 2010 Three Year Education Plan. What does “equity” really mean in SRSDC? Equity has been constructed to mean equity among schools and reduced to economic terms. In SRSDC, equity among schools played out on two levels: the equity between rural and urban schools and the equity among urban schools who were

competing with one another.

Equity is a basic principle in the province and the jurisdiction. One of the most succinct definitions of equity is the use of uneven inputs to foster equal outputs. Obviously the degree and level of equity provided within an organization must be determined from time to time. (Senior Leader, Board Package, December, 1996, p. 6)

Initially, the rural urban inequity was dealt with through two processes: the allocation model and program consolidation/school closure. In Phases 1 and 2, it was apparent that the Board and senior leadership supported and valued the expansion of “choice” in urban areas. However, choice, equity and efficiency existed in tension in relation to rural schools and the question of what “equity” means emerged. Following regionalization, the Board was facing operational challenges in relation to a budget shortfall, aging infrastructure, and uneven enrolment and school utilizations among urban and rural schools. One of the first questions faced by the Board was, “What does equity mean for rural SRSDC students?” Part of the solution to the inequities between rural and urban schools was addressed via the allocation model.

The central premise of regionalization was, and is, equity in education for all Alberta students. If we look around our large jurisdiction we do not see equality. We do not and cannot run IB or French immersion in rural areas of this school division. We do and can however provide equity. We can balance the large central programs in the urban centres with small school allocations to areas where our students are more sparsely populated. Small school allocations are the way

we provide equity to small and rural schools within our jurisdiction. (Trustee comment, Board Minutes, March 1997, p. 9)

For trustees representing the rural regions of the division, equity in rural SRSDC was not about diversity of programming or programming equal to that in urban schools, equity meant a functioning school able to offer a basic education. Because of the provincial per student funding model, this definition of equity for rural schools was operationalized as an additional allocation to support small schools. The challenge to address inequity was attempted through redistribution of funds. However, the additional allocation was based on the minimum staffing needed to operate a school and not a differential allocation based on students' and communities' needs. Overall, there was no evidence of an overall commitment to a differential funding model based on student needs (with the exception of students with severe disabilities). The rural school allocation was referred to as both the "equity of opportunity funding" and the "small school subsidy." Regardless of the name, the funding was a source of tension at the Board level. Phase 1 and 2 Board meeting minutes reflect a debate on whether the principle of redistribution, specifically the redistribution of funds, was an acceptable and/or reasonable practice. Important in this context is the fact that regionalization and the centralization of education funding resulted in a significant loss of revenue for previously resource rich SC county.

Taking away right to collect taxes was fundamental to the province's drive to pool education resources and distribute equally which started in 1994 or earlier. While this socialistic approach is acceptable to many, what is certainly not very

palatable is taking away money from some and giving to others. (Senior Leader comment, Board Minutes, January 1995, p. 8)

References to socialism and the use of the somewhat pejorative term, “subsidy” reflects a lack of support for the principle of redistribution among some leaders within SRSDC. In SRSDC, in relation to rural schools, equity was positioned as a cost (Blackmore, 2000). In debates, equity and subsidy were conflated and subsidy was subsequently contrasted with efficient and responsible use of funds. Smaller rural schools were considered operationally inefficient because they required a subsidy.

We are looking at some efficiencies in SC County but the difference is we are not *subsidizing* SC county schools. (Trustee comment, March 1997, p. 10)

In Board debates, equity for rural schools was set against equity for *all* students in SRSDC; in other words, it would be unfair to urban areas to subsidize the education of students in rural schools.

In operating SRSDC, it is imperative that every opportunity is taken to maximize the funds allocated and to use these funds for the benefit of *all* SRSDC students. (Senior Leader, Board Minutes, March 2003, p. 6)

Support recommendation with a great deal of regret . . . support for recommendation because of students. There must be equity in the division for *all* students. The difference in the cost of educating a student in School X is significant compared to other SRSDC schools which impact students throughout the district . . . even with growth in the area enrolment will not increase and

correct the situation at the school in terms of the economic viability of the school.  
(Trustee Comment, Board Minutes, March 2005, p. 5)

We are now at a defining moment of moral purpose in SRSDC. This is a point where rhetoric is placed into action. Each of us needs to examine our decision about what is right for children or are we our brother's keepers only when it is convenient and does not cost too much. (Trustee comment, Board Minutes, May 2003, p. 12)

It was evident at the end of Phase 2 that further school closure considerations would not be supported at the Board table as school closures carried significant risk in the game. In Phase 3 and 4, the inequities between urban and rural schools were addressed through the funding allocation models.

The second level of inequities among schools relates to urban schools that were competing for students. The interconnectedness of site-based leadership, per pupil funding allocations, and competition among schools created and enhanced inequities among urban schools. It is important to note that inequities among schools were created through the per pupil allocation model and would have been created regardless of competition for students. This "natural" inequity relates to the size of the school and grade structuring. Principals of larger schools have higher levels of discretionary funds because of the economy of scale. Larger schools were then able to provide more resources and/or programming or accumulate significant accumulated operating reserves. Smaller schools, both urban and rural, faced budget constraints and minimal discretionary

funds. In SRSDC, the challenges based on economy of scale were exacerbated when competition was introduced and some schools differentially benefitted from competition. As noted in the phase descriptions, these challenges were typically addressed across phases through a review of the budget allocation models. In Phase 4, the most substantial change to the allocation model was introduced through the Resource Optimization Committee, which adjusted the allocation model to include both fixed and variable allocations. This change differentially benefitted smaller schools and addressed some the inequities among schools. However, to date there has not been a substantive conversation about the different socioeconomic profiles of schools and as noted by the ATA (1990) inequities of allocations can be compounded by the differences that can develop without centralized monitoring between schools in different socio-economic settings.

In SRSDC, equity has primarily been defined as it relates to equity among schools. Furthermore, policy and practice changes addressed inequity through various levels and degrees of redistribution of funds. However, there is no significant evidence of deeper discussions of inequity. Conversations about the relative privilege of the urban areas, the overall challenges associated with lower levels of economic, social, and political capital, and the reality faced by disadvantaged families and students have not occurred in any substantive way. The “reality” of equity in SRSDC aligns with the literature in this area as educational theorists have argued that market principles have shifted how equity is viewed in the education system. In a system dominated by market values, a level of inequity is normal (Ball, 2000), there is a fundamental tension between

substantive goals of equity and the correlative procedural policies derived from ideology of neoliberalism (Codd, 1993), the operation of market principles subjugates equity considerations (Menashy, 2007), and equity is a cost (Blackmore, 2000).

The final chapter of this dissertation examines whether a deeper notion of equity is possible within school systems and how it may be approached and advanced using a Complex Adaptive System (CAS) framework.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusions

My research began with the premises that educational policy matters in the lived realities of students and educational leaders should consider engaging more critically with the policy process. Furthermore, my research asked three questions:

- How and why did school choice policy emerge and evolve in the school division over time?
- How did school choice policies impact equity at the local level?
- How may a Complex Adaptive Systems conceptual framework assist in understanding the policy process and inform future practice?

Through an in-depth 20-year case study of school choice approaches in one school division in the province of Alberta, my research as detailed in Chapters Five and Six demonstrates the complexity and the interconnectedness among school choice policies, equity, and leadership. Specifically, my research details how a newly formed regional school division navigated the introduction and promotion of school choice, as well significant changes to education funding and to the role of principals and parents. This case study contributes to scholarship in documenting the long-term implications of the unprecedented educational reforms that were introduced in Alberta in the mid 1990s. The research findings provide further evidence of the implications of market-driven reforms in educational systems in relation to policy agents' belief systems about choice, how market principles shape procedural policies, how economic language influences educational policy, and the types of school choice programs that emerge. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate how metaphors are used by policy agents to construct social

obligation and adaptive responses. Finally, the case demonstrated the longer-term equity implications of school choice policies. Specifically, the Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) emerged as an organization where inequity became normalized and equity was constructed in terms of economics and assessed at the school level. The findings have implications for policy makers and educational leaders in relation to the equity of educational opportunities and outcomes. This final chapter examines the third research question in more detail. How may a Complex Adaptive Systems conceptual framework assist in understanding the policy process and inform future practice?

### **School Divisions as Complex Adaptive Systems**

My research was structured around the position that a school division is a complex adaptive system (CAS) and that the lens of CAS would be valuable in understanding the policy process. Five characteristics were employed in my research. CAS are open systems with fuzzy boundaries but the local context matters. CAS have distributed control rather than centralized hierarchical control. CAS consist of groups of interconnected agents that act in adaptive ways to pursue individual and collective interests who inform and shape the “rules” of the organization. CAS have continuous cyclical feedback loops. Finally, in CAS there are emergent properties that cannot be predicted based on individual characteristics.

My research provides evidence that the case study school division demonstrates each of the characteristics and, in combination with one another, the characteristics offer conceptual tools to understand policy processes at the local level. In Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC), global narratives about the value and benefits of school

choice and competition impacted local agents to varying degrees. This finding aligns with other research noting that agents in public organizations have different understandings and considerations due to their different positions in the entire system (Lin & Lee, 2011). However, an important research finding was that agents' belief systems seemed more influenced by the rhetoric surrounding choice and their personal experiences rather than the research literature. The influence of grand narratives around the value of choice and competition in relation to school improvement and educational quality coupled with the local context suggests that locally-based action-research projects may help policy development at the local level. In other words, practitioners may be more influenced by my research on the impacts of choice within the local context.

SRSDC, as an organization, was influenced by market principles in both their symbolic and procedural policies. However, the importance of the local context was evident as the uniqueness of the suburban rural geographic profile and the demographic and economic profiles of communities impacted how choice and equity manifested in SRSDC. In fact, the evidence suggests that the relative privilege of SRSDC communities and agents exacerbated the impacts of market mechanisms. As illustrative examples, school division documents did not suggest that inequity at the individual level in terms of access influenced policy changes nor was it raised as a concern by the majority of interviewees.

In SRSDC, there was evidence that the introduction of site-based leadership (increased distributed control) significantly impacted school leaders' beliefs and behaviours as they relate to school choice and relationships with colleagues. Site-based

leadership both enabled and complicated school choice and appeared to have a ripple effect in terms of the overall functioning of the organization. Many interviewees commented that site-based leadership was a significant factor in the evolution of choice policies. Site-based leadership enabled the principal's ability to develop choice programming at the school level, which resulted in the proliferation in programs to attract higher ability and more motivated students. In addition, site-based leadership partially shaped social obligations within the organization. Both the family and game metaphors framed the principals' primary obligations to people within their school rather than the division community as a whole, which had relational impacts across the organization. Similar to the findings of Keshavarz et al. (2010), control in the school division was not fully distributed and there were shifts to the levels of devolved authority to school principals over the course of the case study. However, it was also clear that centralizing decision-making is itself a complex political endeavour as it was met with overt and covert resistance from principal agents.

In SRSDC, there was also clear evidence of parallel formal and informal systems of rules operating in the school system and there were fluidities with different rules, values, and interaction patterns over the course of the case study (Keshavarz et al., 2010). Similar to other research (Keshavarz et al., 2010) is the reality that not everyone follows the formal "rules." Networks among leaders and parents were prevalent throughout the case study and these feedback loops impacted how policies were received, resisted, and enacted as counter-narratives and "undertones" were prevalent. The networks were notable in Phase 4 when there was a more restrictive school choice approach in relation

to boundary exemptions. Specifically, in their social networks, parents shared strategies to challenge the choice restrictions. Furthermore, there was evidence of a strong counter-narrative to choice restrictions among principals and parents as they viewed the policy changes as being a strategy to protect under-performing schools. In addition, adaptive responses of agents were shaped by the informal and formal rules with complexity shown in navigating interests. The enactment of school choice policies involved levels of competition and cooperation among principals as well as balancing individual and collective interests. There was ample evidence of navigating behind the scenes at both the Board and principal levels. Also evident during the case study suggesting that a complex adaptive system was at work was the way in which small changes rippled out quickly from the agents concerned, then gave rise to counter-actions, which in turn rippled quickly through the system. Ripple effects were most noteworthy in the evolution of honours programming and in the enactment of boundary exemption policies. This aligns with other research in public organizations (Lin & Lee, 2011).

Finally, within SRSDC, there were emergent properties particularly in relationship to how equity was operationalized at the local level. Despite a continued focus on equity, the use and reliance on market principles and mechanisms resulted in increasing inequity over the course of the case study and the reduction of equity to financial considerations. The increasing inequity and the normalization of winners and losers is difficult to acknowledge but critical to face in public education. My research demonstrates the need to maintain vigilance about deeper notions of justice. Many of the findings in the case study align with previous research on school choice but the use of a

CAS framework provides insights into the “why” of policies and their associated outcomes. A CAS framework highlights the need to focus on process, interactions, and the game.

### **Policy within a Complex Adaptive System**

In recent years, policy theorists have advocated that policy be viewed as more of a political process in which persuasion, emotions, ideas, and power are the sources of change (Howlett et al., 2009; Stone, 2012). Furthermore, there is an increasing amount of empirical research which deploys the complexity frame of reference as an architecture for policy investigation and interpretation (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). My research started with the assumption that the policy process in an organization is a complex process—that a school division is a complex adaptive system (CAS). As noted above, the evidence supported this assumption and CAS proved to be a valuable conceptual framework. Overall, it is promising that the use of CAS is being advocated as important framework for current policy analysis in education globally (Snyder, 2013) and in Alberta specifically (Brandon et al., 2013). However, there are cautions and limitations of a CAS framework, which are noted in the implications section of this chapter.

Aligning with previous research, a CAS framework offered several analytic benefits. First, CAS allowed a more holistic perspective (Hall & Clark, 2010) on the problems of school choice. In SRSDC, school choice had both technical and adaptive challenges. In my research, the pragmatic and technical tensions related to space and facility utilizations, budgetary restrictions, and transportation costs. In addition, more symbolic matters such as the purpose of public education, the types of programs that

should be offered in a public education system, equity issues, relational challenges, and the roles of principals and parents also emerged as complexities within the policy process. Generally speaking, in relation to school choice, technical policy solutions were introduced in response to adaptive challenges. It is important that both researchers and policy-makers consider policy and policy challenges from a more holistic perspective rather than compartmentalizing problems and policy solutions. Secondly, CAS also offered insights into the dynamics of organizational change (Bovaird, 2008) and it offered perspective on the unintended and unforeseen consequences of planned policy interventions (Merali & Allen, 2011) in attempts to both promote and curtail school choice. In my research, the relational challenges associated with organizational change, the informal networks, the construction of adaptive responses, the influence of counter-narratives to the official policy position, and the equity implications are most illustrative of the dynamics of organizational change and unintended consequences. Finally, perhaps most importantly in terms of informing future practice, the research and the use of CAS further highlighted the inadequacies of reductionist models (Snyder, 2013; van der Steen et al., 2013). From a practice perspective and with respect to addressing the complex challenges faced by educational leaders, my research demonstrates the limitations of a linear, structural rational approach to policy-making – particularly as it relates to equity issues. Although I adopted the standpoint that policy making is complex, there was little evidence to suggest that the agents within the SRSDC organization viewed and/or embraced policy-making as a complex process.

The project of policy-making as a rational project remains pervasive (Stone,

2012) and there are numerous examples throughout the case study in which problems and policy were approached as applied problem solving which privileged instrumental rationality and a market view of society. Three examples from my research include strategic planning, changes to choice policies, and the reduction of equity to the realm of funding.

The 1994–1995 introduction of 3-year strategic plans for Alberta public services, including school divisions, privileges a model of society that is based on instrumental rationality. Strategic plans suggest that there is a linear nature to progress and that improvement proceeds through a series of logical steps (Lin & Lee, 2011). Throughout the case study, the Board and senior leadership teams approached strategic planning with commitment and earnest effort with particular emphasis on educational programming and planning. Furthermore, at the start of each phase there was an initial Board directive to address “planning” across the division. The evidence does not suggest that there was a lack of focus on strategic planning but rather the “plans” did not go as intended.

Phase 1 - SRSDC will be a comprehensive public education system that provides an appropriate number of services, choices, and alternatives.

Phase 2 - New programs will be implemented after appropriate planning is done.

Phase 3 - There is a system wide strategic approach to division programming.

Phase 4 - There will be a comprehensive review of operations with a focus on possible changes to decision-making, programming, and the allocation of resources.

In a strategic planning environment, policies are developed to support and enable

achievement of strategic goals. Overall, as one examines the policy shifts over the case study time period (with the exception of Phase 3), there was more logic, more rules with attempts to make them more objective, and more fees levied, in attempts to address “concerns” related to school choice. Furthermore, inequities among schools were seen as the primary concerns, were defined as budgetary issues, and remediations were addressed through changes to the funding allocations. The phase descriptions certainly demonstrate that there were technical challenges relating to school budgets, transportation costs, and facility utilizations. However, there was a tendency to look at the “problems” reductively and deductively. Leaders looked at the parts that could be broken down and devised linear plans to address the parts of the problem. Leaders in SRSDC approached problems as if they were complicated and not complex. Furthermore, as with most public policies, the solutions relied on an overly simplistic view of human nature (Brooks, 2012).

The reliance on instrumental rationality/ applied problem solving is not a criticism of any one leader or of SRSDC as an organization as the view that policy-making, as noted above, is a rational project remains pervasive (Stone, 2012). Furthermore, the beliefs about rationality, reason, and objectivity are omnipresent, seem natural and inevitable (Brooks, 2012). The literature notes that educational initiatives often attempt to dwell in the realm of the complicated when in fact they are operating in the realm of the complex (Duit et al., 2010). Furthermore, Dryzek (1990) has argued the predominant response to the challenge of complexity is based on a conventional wisdom which is founded upon instrumental rationality and a quest to maintain control over a problematical environment. It is also noted that educational leaders and policy experts

devise policies targeting a single or relatively small set of problems and launch it, believing (or at least hoping), that the solution they are advocating is whole, complete, widely replicable, and easily actionable (Snyder, 2013). In addition, Anderson (2009) notes that substantive issues like equity are divisive and messy and often schools may prefer to maintain good relations over taking on what is risky and controversial. Finally, overall it has been argued that there remains a dominant modernist paradigm of reason in which objective analysis is harnessed to rational action whereby policymakers seek to manage economic and social affairs rationally in an apolitical manner based on the principles of social science (Schwandt, 1997).

However, this case study clearly demonstrated that “rational” policy solutions were not effective as the data also clearly revealed that there were more substantive issues and challenges. There were clear differences among principals relating to goals of public education, equity, the value of choice, the role of competition, and the overall quality of leadership. Collegial relationships and organizational trust were often strained and/or superficially cooperative. As noted above (Snyder, 2013), within SRSDC, there appeared to be assumptions, or hope, at the senior leadership levels that bringing logic and clarification to “choice” and changing funding models would “address” the equity and relational challenges. Overall, these were technical solutions to substantive challenges. The rational problem solving approach did not mitigate the substantive challenges faced by the organization and in fact, it has been argued in this dissertation that inequity increased over the course of the case study. This case study offers evidence, and I would argue there is a moral imperative, that leaders engage with complexity (Hall

& Clark, 2010) as educational challenges cannot be adequately dealt with via linear structural approaches (Duit et al., 2010; Morrison, 2010). The next section offers suggestions based on a policy process in a complex adaptive system.

### **Moving Forward: Policy in a Complex Adaptive System**

Leading a school division is a daunting endeavour. The data from this case study demonstrated that leaders should more fully consider and embrace complexity, embrace the conflicting perspectives, positions, and values of people, and more fully integrate the true, and complex, nature of human beings (Brooks, 2012). In addition, further acknowledgment and acceptance that there are no easy answers to complex and substantive challenges is needed among educational leaders. Senior education leaders should reconsider the “hope” around linear, structural rational approaches to policy making in their complex environments. Furthermore, leaders should challenge traditional strategic planning processes as strategic plans maintain the focus in the realm of complicated as they are linked with compartmentalizing problems and defined action plans. Traditional strategic planning ignores the “reality” of the game and complex systems. In the reality of a school division within a complexity framework, causal relationships disappear and the ability to determine the actions necessary to reach the specified goals is reduced (Stacey, 1996). Planning must, therefore, engage with the complexity of the game.

What can replace traditional strategic planning? Although complexity poses some leadership challenges, Bovaird (2008) notes a complex adaptive system (CAS) framework also creates a context for understandings that should allow leaders to more

ambitiously plan the rules of the game. Senior leaders, then, need a clear sense of their values and purpose and they should to work to structure the game to achieve their purposes. In other words, the work of an educational leader is to influence the ways in which the CAS operates, and thereby the range of outcomes which are likely. It is not my intent to suggest that this is an easy task; however, senior leaders need to be very strategic and know and the emerging patterns within their organization (Bovaird, 2008). This is a “meta-planning” approach and is very different from traditional strategic planning. It does not involve the development of a preferred set of strategic actions with specific targets attached; rather it entails strategically tracking how emerging situations offer the possibility of changing the “opportunity map” facing the organization (Bovaird, 2008). It is an enhanced engagement with the process and politics of policy-making. The next section outlines what this might look like for a leader invested in defining and improving deeper notions of equity in a school division.

**Complexity and equity: Structuring the game.** As an educational leader, I am invested in equitable educational access, opportunities, relationships, and outcomes. My research demonstrated the challenge of identifying, articulating, and making gains on equity goals in a school division. The literature also suggests that equity goals are both complex and contentious (Anderson, 2009; Jordan, 2010) presenting both political and technical challenges (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). The following are lessons learned from this in-depth case study. This section is a call to action for educational leaders committed to an equity agenda to be more intentional in their efforts to shape the system to more closely align with the ideals of a democratic education project. I’ve chosen to

deliberately use more prescriptive language in this section as the lessons are intended to be a challenge to educational leaders to critically reflect on practice. This section aligns with Blackmore (1996) that there is a capacity at the local to work collectively and individually to rework contemporary discourse in more progressive ways.

The first lesson relates to what is needed to engage in a meta-planning approach that structures the rules of the game to support equity. In many organizations, an explicit and direct defining and prioritizing of equity will need to be the first steps. An equity-led policy direction is not going to naturally emerge in SRSDC and this may be the case in other school divisions. Changing the rules to promote equity will require senior leaders to confront an attitude and culture within their divisions and communities that do not recognize privilege and a lack of systemic equity (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). There is both diplomatic complexity and professional risk associated with leading a policy initiative that asks those who have historically had the advantage to acknowledge that history and support a policy that would potentially relinquish their advantage (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). Based on my research findings that SRSDC emerged as an organization where inequity was naturalized, this is a risk and a political struggle that I believe is necessary. Although the idea that there are political struggles in education is not new as there is an inevitable conflict over values of choice, efficiency, equity, and quality (Stout, Tallericco, & Scribner, 1995), the moral and ethical issues and the implications and conflicts regarding these values are often relegated to a realm of politics and deemed “irrational.” In this case study, there was limited evidence of substantive dialogue regarding values and the tensions among choice, equity and efficiency. Furthermore,

policy solutions focused on the technical aspects offering evidence that leadership that prioritizes equity must embrace the political and the irrational. Sanderson (2009) argues for a practical rationality where we are not just concerned with the instrumental notion of what works but rather with a broader practical notion of what is appropriate in the circumstances (Sanderson, 2002) while others have argued that emotions and passions must be recognized in decision-making (Brooks, 2012). Part of the role of a senior leader is to create a safe space where leaders may discuss their values and work through the varying levels of contradiction and conflict. This can be difficult and divisive work (Anderson, 2009), at least at the beginning of that process; however, the alternative is to allow the market to be the dominating explicit and implicit metaphor. Furthermore, Morgan (2006) contends the primary responsibility of leaders is to create the environment where the characteristics of complexity theory can emerge as this can lead to a shared vision/metaphor for the organization. In other words, leaders must let go of the more mechanistic approaches to strategic planning and adopt a planning approach that promotes interactions, the exchange of experiences and ideas, and experimentation. A leader needs to be attuned to emerging strategies, patterns, and interactions which offer opportunities to shape the organizational vision.

Based on the inequities within SRSDC and following an explicit commitment to equity, I would argue that the next step for a shared vision of an equity-led policy approach is an honest conversation about equity and inequity. In a recent study of a school division attempting to address core matters of educational equity, one of the initial steps was an explicit recognition and public identification of the distinct regional

disparities of opportunity and access that had perpetuated over time within the division (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). Furthermore, in relation to understanding inequity, there needs to be a broader consultation process that is deliberate in discussing ethical and moral concerns and is more inclusive of *all* legitimate voices (Toulmin, 2001). As noted in the introduction section, equity may be seen from access, outcomes, and relational lenses. I believe relational equity is integral to both equitable access and opportunities and relational equity can be honoured through organizational processes (Young, 1990). In the case study, in terms of process, SRSDC's policy work generally, and work focused on equity, was often done through committees which were not sufficiently inclusive of people with varied viewpoints. The voices of the disadvantaged were not heard and engagement efforts engaged the engaged resulting in loops that continued to serve the privileged. From the onset of an equity-led policy direction, there needs to be a commitment to ongoing broader consultation to further understand social problems and the inequities implicit in relations and interactions. Framing the approach to policy change in this manner changes the lens to a more inclusive one that is both process-driven and outcomes-driven. The process becomes more equitable from a relational perspective. In an inclusive process, the policy reform becomes an organic, changing process rather than a preordained solution formulated in the realm of the complicated and reliant upon all the agents within it to succeed (Snyder, 2013).

This research suggests that metaphors play a key role in how leaders think about complex issues and this case study supports that leaders should be attuned to the symbolism in all aspects of the organization as symbolism is a pervasive component of

the human experience. In the case study, both the metaphor of the family and the game constructed inequity as normal and this was symbolic of the more implicit SRSDC organization culture. Inequity, at least partially, represented the “culture” as it represented the shared sense of reality within SRSDC (Morgan, 2006). This culture was emergent and not intentional as individual senior leaders in SRSDC did have a clear sense of purpose and a clear vision for the organization. However, their purpose was not universally shared by other leaders in the organization, nor did it exist in procedural policies and the day-to-day interactions among agents within the organization. This case study and participants’ reflections supports the existence that a shared organizational purpose cannot be assumed. Furthermore, the importance of a shared purpose cannot be over-estimated as previous literature notes that the degree to which agents within the network share perceptions about their environment will influence the effectiveness of the network overall (Koppenjan & Klijn, 2004). In an equity-led policy environment, there also needs to be an organizational metaphor that supports equity.

Aligning with the importance of language and symbolism in shaping an equity-led policy agenda, previous research has noted the importance of a positive construction of equity (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). In my case study, descriptors like redistribution, allocation, and subsidy often carried a negative and/or technical connotation. Halverson and Plecki (2015) note the impact of constructing a school division’s differential resource allocation strategies as investments. The strategies were not subsidies or allocations but investments in students, schools, and communities. Furthermore, although a focus on the resourcing of equity-led initiatives should not be the sole policy, an examination of and

decisions on equitable distribution of resources are necessary. In other words, although the matter of resource allocation is insufficient, it is a necessary component of an equity-led policy approach (Gewirtz, 2002). The resource question must be addressed and include a reconceptualization and articulation of the resource challenge as well as a process to publicly question and redefine what was the most “fair” way to allocate resources to students and schools (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). When equity is defined in terms of equality of outcomes as well as access, a distributionally equitable education system would, in theory, be one in which all schools have sufficient resources to achieve similar educational outcomes. In this case, some schools or districts would need more resources than others because of their greater proportions of students with higher needs (Ladd, 2008).

In summary, the first lesson using a CAS framework to lead an equity-led policy direction involves meta-planning the game. Senior leaders should structure of the game to directly prioritize equity as it is unlikely to naturally emerge as the first priority. Senior leaders should set up the game to more inclusively engage multiple agents who are representative of *all* experiences in a system. Finally, senior leaders should create an interactional context so the game has a co-constructed organizational metaphor that includes a positive construction of equity. Finally, resourcing equity-led is important.

**Complexity and equity: Playing the game.** The second lesson emerging from the case study relates to playing the game and accepting that building an organizational culture that creates and sustains an equitable school system is an *ongoing* political struggle. Senior leaders may have positional authorities but these authorities are

insufficient to build or sustain an equitable school system. Rules, credos, and belief statements are also insufficient to create, build, and sustain an equitable school system. Technical policy solutions, more clarity, more objectivity, and more specificity are insufficient to create, build, and sustain a culture that supports equity. Senior leaders must remain engaged in the policy process as even if one assumes there is general agreement on the goals of an equity-led policy agenda, leaders must then continue to act politically (Heifetz et al., 2009) as in a CAS with distributed control 100% consensus cannot be assumed. Ongoing efforts are needed to build awareness and consensus. Senior leaders need to assess the politics of the school division (Heifetz et al., 2009): What is the level of engagement with policy and equity initiatives across the school division? Who has informal power and influence? When a change is proposed, what are the potential losses of a change? Where are the hidden alliances? They need to find and work with their allies, stay connected with the opposition, and continually articulate and stay connected to their purpose (Heifetz et al., 2009). There is a need for sustained efforts that focus on policy enactment in a complex adaptive system (CAS).

Engagement with policy enactment is perhaps the greatest benefit of a CAS framework as CAS provides insight into the game of policy enactment and the importance of feedback loops and mechanisms. When considering CAS and policy enactment, the barriers between policy design and enactment should be collapsed to create a single iterative process driven by feedback to core decision makers from the local level agents (Snyder, 2013). Senior leaders need to understand and use the feedback loops that emerge as a result of initial policy interventions (van der Steen et al., 2013). In

other words, senior leaders need to create cycles of interaction between them, the decision makers, and those charged with enactment (Snyder, 2013). They need to foster a collaborative environment throughout the system by actively creating opportunities for interaction (Loorbach, 2010). Once a year conferences or bi-annual trainings do not allow for a sufficient level of familiarity and trust to be built to allow for a free flow of ideas (Levin, 2010). Senior leaders need to be widely connected, openly communicate, and seek feedback.

The focus on interaction and collaboration moves the attention of senior leaders from analysis *ex ante* towards the local knowledge of the process as it emerges. Senior leaders need to use local knowledge to anticipate and get ahead of political challenges. Interaction allows opportunities to invest in coalition building and to broaden the base of support for decisions that could be unpopular in various quarters. In equity-led policy changes, it will be necessary to anticipate and persevere in the face of the inevitable pushback from groups that perceive differential investments to be unfair to them and their interests (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). Senior leaders need to be proactive and not reactive. They also need to recognize the complexities of agents and their interests as part of the process and not a challenge to an equity agenda or their authorities as leaders. Furthermore, senior leaders need to test their implicit or explicit assumptions about the way things are out there (Bovaird, 2008). In CAS, change does not follow a linear path as there are tipping points and threshold effects. Although difficult to anticipate, senior leaders should not to prevent these threshold effects but rather recognize that they are going to happen, try to limit the unintended consequences of these rapid shifts, and

perhaps harness them to affect desired change (Snyder, 2013). In other words, prescriptive policy tools will not prevent or effectively manage policy effects.

Finally, although the destination is increased equity in a school division, the manner and the path to improved equity will be different for schools within a school division. The majority of studies using CAS as a model focus on the necessity of experimentation and flexibility at the site-level (Bovaird, 2008; Keshavarz et al., 2010; Sanderson, 2009; van der Steen et al., 2013). Senior leaders should not attempt a one-size-fits-all equity-policy approach as equity at the school level will need to reflect the local context of the individual school. Local adaptability and divergent enactment imply knowing what happens when it happens, require space for local professional judgment and, therefore, imply variety at the system level (Bovaird, 2008). Senior leaders need to embrace and frame site-based leadership and distributed control as the best way to achieve equity. An equitable system will mean a contextually tethered, community-based representation of equity (Halverson & Plecki, 2015).

Ultimately, successful enactment of an equity-led policy agenda requires short and long term commitments. The agents will need to talk and work their way through the inevitable bumps in the road, build the communicative structures to smooth contextual differences, and share experiences learned (Halverson & Plecki, 2015). Success cannot be built into the reform from the outset but must grow with the process as it expands and takes hold (Eppel, Turner, & Wolf, 2011), as ultimately creating an equitable system is a genuinely interactive activity (Bovaird, 2008).

To summarize, school divisions impact the lives of students and families through

the provision of educational opportunities. This case study has demonstrated the complexity of policy within a school system. The evidence went beyond the misalignment between substantive and technical policies to demonstrate how the structure and rules of the game, the adaptive responses of the agents, and the interactions among agents and rules shaped equity within the school division. Furthermore, the case study demonstrated that technical policy solutions are inadequate to address the substantive issues and the complexities relating to school choice.

Creating an equitable school system is a complex endeavor and this case study highlights the importance of engagement with the school division as a complex adaptive system (CAS). An equitable school system is based on access and outcomes but it is also about process and relationships. The design of the system, the practices within the system, and resourcing must continually be considered (Field, Kuczera, & Pont, 2007). A CAS framework provides insights to merge and align the substantive and the technical, as well as the abstract and concrete. Insights gleaned from the case study were used to frame suggestions that may help policy-makers and educational leaders in the future as we continue to struggle with improving equity within the educational system. This dissertation concludes with implications for leadership development, educational governance, and practice and research.

### **Implications**

**Educational leadership.** The work of educational leaders is complex. My research clearly demonstrated that leaders differ in their perspectives on quality leadership, school choice, and equity. Managing the conflicts and tensions among the

core values of education is challenging work. If leaders are, as I am, concerned about the equity issue, there must be acknowledgment that this is both politically and conceptually difficult work. Are leadership preparation programs adequately preparing future leaders to address equity?

Speaking from personal experience, there is little in my compulsory academic history that shaped my commitment to equity. I chose optional undergraduate and graduate courses related to equity and society because of personal experiences and interests. My values were primarily informed by my childhood and early professional experiences working in correctional settings. Furthermore, leadership graduate programs and leadership development programs often focus on the leader as an individual with specific traits, competencies, and abilities. In my opinion, there is insufficient preparation on the political nature of the work of educational leadership. As Halverson and Plecki (2015) note equity-focused leadership is most evident when collective, strategic actions are taken by leaders and communities that build system-wide knowledge of the types of equity challenges that exist, marshal resources to address inequities, and sustain a continuous dialogue and course of action in support of long-term, sustainable strategies that will improve outcomes for all students, particularly for those most in need.

What is needed from a leadership development lens to advance equity-focused leadership? Leadership development programs need to focus on a more critical leadership practice. It is important that educational leaders understand the connection between education and the ideological, political, and economic spheres of society and how schools partake in them (Apple, 1995). Leadership development should focus on

building awareness and understanding of the material, social, and cultural conditions under which students learn, teachers teach, and leaders lead (Blackmore, 2006).

Furthermore, there needs to be an increased emphasis on how education systems and leadership practices are immersed in and shaped by broader societal narratives. Greater understanding may enhance the reflexive capacity of leaders in terms of their own structural location, overt and tacit political commitments, and their own embodied action (Apple et al., 2010). Perhaps with greater reflexivity and more inclusive processes, the incongruences between espoused equity goals and the reality on the ground may be reduced, as leaders are able to locate school reform in the larger context of social policies (Anderson, 2009). Finally, certainly at the system level, this case study demonstrates the need for senior leaders to engage with complexity theory and complex adaptive systems as they relate to organizational change. It is time for graduate programs, professional associations, and school divisions to more fully embrace complexity and the moral imperative that should guide our work.

**The Board of Trustees.** Boards are purportedly elected to represent the needs and interests of the communities, parents, and students in their area. The case study provides evidence that raise concerns about who is “really” represented by the Board of Trustees. In SRSDC, the Board was, on numerous occasions, more responsive to parents with social, economic, and political capital. Furthermore, the literature notes that given the growth of market-based school choice, a key challenge for progressive, equity-oriented policymakers is how to meet the demands for parental choice while also ensuring that empowerment is maximized through equitable access and outcomes and

through the democratic participation of parents, teachers, and students (Scott, 2013).

These are complex challenges for school board trustees. Within their democratic roles, Boards of Trustees should reflect on whether they are responsive to the needs of *all* families and students, and not prioritize those with economic, social, and political capital. Whether this can be achieved with the current electoral system is questionable as one trustee noted, “to lead you have to be willing to not get re-elected” (Trustee, Interview). However, there are several recommendations that emerge from this case study including building greater understanding of equity, governance, and policy.

Trustees would benefit from greater awareness of global policy trends, the critiques of global policy trends, and an understanding of equity. Professional development in these areas as well as a commitment to understanding equity challenges in their local context would be of value. The trustees public engagement processes should strive to include more voices and specifically those who are under-represented in traditional policy processes. Furthermore, policy “training” should extend beyond the rational, applied problem solving approach and delve into the complexity of education systems.

I think that the school board associations could be doing more to provide that leadership (around policy and governance) for their trustees. (Trustee, Interview)

One of the fundamental premises of my research was that policy matters as policies are a reflection of values. Perhaps, one of the more disappointing aspects of this case study was that policies were not generally considered as reflections of values.

Policy solutions most often addressed the technical elements and avoided or minimized

the substantive and adaptive challenges. As trustees play a key role in policy-making and they need to be clear in how their personal values shape the organizational values. They need to move beyond educational rhetoric and reflect on the alignment between symbolic and technical policies. Boards will continue to be involved in budgets and busing but what appears to be missing are questions relating to how budget and buses connect with more clearly articulated, collaboratively developed organizational values. Questions need to expand from is the budget balanced to include who benefits from this budget? And who is disadvantaged by this budget? Trustees need to continually ask who gets what, how and why in the operation of the school system. Similar to leaders, those in governance roles should build awareness and understanding of the material, social, and cultural conditions under which students learn, teachers teach, and leaders lead (Blackmore, 2006). For boards to be effective from an equity perspective, we need courageous leadership.

Sometimes there is more than one right answer. Sometimes there's no right answer and it really is the lesser of evils. But again there's so much that rather than say subjective I would say is values-laden. It's really important when trustees are making policies that they understand that. I don't think it's a bad thing but you have to recognize it. (Trustee, Interview)

Really what a board needs are the qualities that good leaders need, whether you're the chair or one of the other trustees. Capacity to listen, capacity to learn, understanding of self, and one's own values and biases. (Trustee, Interview)

**Practice and research.** This case study demonstrates the value of using a complex adaptive systems (CAS) framework for theory and practice. In recent years, CAS frameworks have been advocated as important frameworks for future policy analysis in education (Snyder, 2013). Most valuable from my perspective is that CAS provides a framework for educational leaders to draw upon to address the challenges they are facing as it gives due attention to the processes and politics of change. My research and a CAS framework offers many opportunities for practitioners. It steers practitioners away from looking at policy issues in isolation and seeking reductionist approaches targeting specific policy areas (Snyder, 2013). It challenges practitioners to engage with the complexity of our work (Duit et al., 2010). It provides an opportunity to move beyond linear approaches to policies and embrace both iterative feedback and flexibility. Finally, it provides a window of optimism to address some of the complex problems, such as educational equity, that we continue to face. However, from a policy perspective generally, more research using a CAS framework at the local level is needed as our understanding for its potential is at the emerging stages (Bovaird, 2008; Rhodes, 2008).

There are some caveats and cautions in relation to the CAS framework. As noted previously, CAS does not offer a value position nor does it offer specific opportunities to problematize or critique ideas or narratives that may influence local policies. The framework's strength lay in its potential to explain the mechanisms underlying change. However, it is important for the reader to recognize that my data set would likely have been interpreted very differently if I came from a value position that prioritized efficiency and/or choice over equity. Furthermore, although within CAS there is a focus on agents

and interactions within systems, other than examining context, there is no mechanism for examining why certain agents are more influential than others. For example, in my research, critics of choice policies became more influential in Phase Three and Four partially as a result of the pragmatic and relational consequences of choice. But additional factors shaped that changing influence and the CAS framework provided limited insight into them. Although my research suggests that the CAS framework may be beneficial for critical examination of the mechanisms of educational policy change, it is important that researchers, policy-makers, and educational leaders committed to an equity-agenda remain vigilant as to how CAS may be used in the future to inform policy given its limitations.

Finally, specifically related to complexity, school choice, and equity, more research is needed that engages directly with the experiences of students. Research examining school choice and student outcomes often use analysis of achievement, school attendance, and/ or high school completion data, as proxies for student and policy success (Booker et al., 2008; Chakrabarti, 2008; Naoilly et al., 2009). Interviews with students have not been frequently used as an investigative approach but this case study and previous research highlights the needs more investigation using this approach. It has been reported that students' perceptions of their school's position affect their feelings about their education, their identities as learners, and their future possibilities (Heath, 2009). In a recent study, Sattin-Bajaj (2014) notes a nuanced portrait of students' engagement with the choice process which relates to their ethnic and socioeconomic positions which have broader implications for their choices in terms of educational and

life outcomes. Neither quantitative data on student outcomes, nor student interviews, were within the scope of my research; however, consistent with other research (Lubienski, 2006; Musset, 2012; Van Zanten, 2009), there are “have” and “have not” schools and programs and consequently have and have not students across SRSDC. Future research needs to focus not on proxy data, but on students’ lived experiences of school choice policies. From a methodological perspective, it more challenging to secure consent to interview students; however, understanding their experience is needed. The integration of student perspectives will add to the theoretical and practical knowledge base relating to the complexity of policy process and outcomes and may make significant contributions to an equity-led policy process. In relation to my research, as noted previously, active engagement with parents who were not active in the policy process would have added to the depth of the research findings.

### **Final Thoughts**

This case study of school choice policies in one public school division in the province of Alberta supports the need to engage with complexity theory. In the case, school choice policies underwent considerable evolution over the course of the case study. Policies which encouraged and supported choice in urban areas were prevalent in Phases 1 and 2. Policies in the initial phases were generally enabling in nature. In Phase 4, there was a considerable shift in policies generally and choice policies specifically with choice becoming more restrictive and policy more prescriptive. Throughout the phases, SRSDC as an organization strived for equity and efficiency. However, it’s been argued in this dissertation that neither equity nor efficiency were achieved. In fact, equity of

access to choice opportunities at the individual level decreased. Over the 20-year time period, the operation of school choice increasingly resulted in supporting self-interest, privileged the privileged, and “choice” has evolved into a private good. Policy-makers within SRSDC looked to policy as a linear structural problem-solving tool and the focus was primarily on the technical rather than the substantive issues facing the organization. Overall, significant cautions are warranted for individuals who are committed to a democratic education project. The discrepancies between espoused goals and realities on the ground were at least partially due to the incongruence between symbolic and technical policies; however, the characteristics of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) provide insights into the “game” behind the policy processes and unintended outcomes. Funding mechanisms, the diversity of agents, the diversity of beliefs, and site-based leadership shaped the rules of the game to produce competition thresholds and ripple effects. The adaptive responses by principals and parents who are active choosers were shaped and informed by the rules and the realities on the ground. Throughout the case study, a variety of informal feedback loops had significant impacts on policy enactment. Formal policies in the case study had an official narrative but there was always “backstories” among leaders and parents that influenced perceptions of policies and the manner in which they were enacted. This case study points to the need for senior leaders to stay connected with process and create maximum opportunity interactions and feedback.

In this dissertation, the case study phase descriptions outlined and demonstrated the shifts both in policy design and policy intention. The various school choice policies

were driven, in part, by the philosophy of senior leadership and by pragmatic realities at the division and school levels. However, evident from the interviewees is that these policy changes were introduced and enacted in an organization without a unifying metaphor. Individuals and sub-groups see the world in different ways and have different aspirations about how the organization should “be.” Actual policy texts and symbolic indicators (metaphors, opinions, and beliefs) suggest that the narrative of neoliberal and market inspired educational reforms have influenced and shaped SRSDC policy and practice. Primary metaphors, the family and the game, normalized the reality of “winners and losers” and “have and have nots” within SRSDC. The predominant adaptive responses of leaders, board trustees, and parents privilege self-interest over collective responsibility. The game metaphor creates distance between individual actions and their personal values because it’s “part of the game.” Furthermore, the family and game metaphors and the constructed rules of the game helps to avoid the substantive differences among school leaders because the issue becomes about rule compliance as opposed to a deeper conversation about fairness, equity, and the goals of public education. The way forward, from an equity perspective, calls for an honest conversation about equity in the school division, a re-structuring of the game, and an acknowledgement of the complexity of our work.

### **Personal reflection**

At the onset of my research, I’m not sure I truly appreciated the complexity of policy-making and leadership. A valuable lesson learned was a growing awareness and understanding that the diversity of values, opinions, and belief systems among educators

parallels the diversity among all people. As an educational leader, I learned three key lessons: understand your values and be explicit about them, recognize and confront the tensions and ambiguities that characterize leadership roles, and embrace the political artistry of leadership.

This case study provided an opportunity to engage with educational leaders and elected trustees who are passionate about public education. Some were more passionate about choice, others were more passionate about equity, and yet others were more passionate about being pragmatic about the important work they do. These passions influenced people's perceptions and judgments of various policies and the policy process. In order to move beyond educational rhetoric and superficial teamwork, leaders need to have difficult and ongoing conversations about conflicting values, what policies really mean, and their potential implications. The discussion of values has to extend beyond rhetoric, beyond motherhood statements that everyone supports. We have to accept that our differences and work through the conflicts to co-construct a set of shared values.

Finally, I admire and respect my former and current colleagues in SRSDC. They are passionate people who care about children and families. However, I did come to understand that my passion for equitable access at the individual level was not shared by many of my colleagues. In SRSDC, the voices and experiences of students and families who are vulnerable, particularly those who are economically disadvantaged, are not part of the policy discourse. For many of my colleagues, their constructions of equity have been shaped by other experiences. As an organization, I believe it is important to create a shared construction of equity.

It is imperative that I, as a leader, find my allies and engage my colleagues in continued conversations about equity at the level of the individual. As an organization, is SRSDC satisfied with the choice programming for the privileged? As an organization, is it acceptable to perpetuate societal inequalities? As I move forward, I may not be satisfied with the answers but at least I will have had the conversation. That is step 1 in a personal political project. This dissertation has been impacted by willingness to engage; perhaps, it will now impact the organization's readiness to engage in conversation.

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**Appendix A**

**List of Suburban Rural School Division Case (SRSDC) Documents**

Suburban Rural School Division (2014). SRSDC 2014–2017 Strategic Education Plan and 2013–2014 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2013). SRSDC 2013–2016 Strategic Education Plan and 2012–2013 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2012). SRSDC 2012–2015 Strategic Education Plan and 2011–2012 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2011). SRSDC 2011–2014 Strategic Education Plan and 2010–2011 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2010). SRSDC 2010–2013 Strategic Education Plan and 2009–2010 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2010). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report 2009–2010.

Suburban Rural School Division (2009). SRSDC 2009–2012 Strategic Education Plan and 2008–2009 Annual Education Results Report.

Suburban Rural School Division (2008). SRSDC 2008–2011 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2008). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report 2008–2009.

Suburban Rural School Division (2007). SRSDC 2007–2010 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2007). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2006–2007.

Suburban Rural School Division (2006). SRSDC 2006–2009 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2006). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2005–2006.

Suburban Rural School Division (2005). SRSDC 2005–2008 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2005). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2004–2005.

Suburban Rural School Division (2004). SRSDC 2004–2007 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2004). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2003–2004

Suburban Rural School Division (2003). SRSDC 2003–2006 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2003). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2002–2003.

Suburban Rural School Division (2002). SRSDC 2002–2005 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2002). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2001–2002.

Suburban Rural School Division (2001). SRSDC 2001–2004 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2001). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

2000–2001.

Suburban Rural School Division (2000). SRSDC 2000–2003 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (2000). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report

1999–2000.

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

Suburban Rural School Division (1999). SRSDC 1999–2002 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (1999). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report  
1998–1999.

Suburban Rural School Division (1998). SRSDC 1998–2001 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (1998). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report  
1997–1998.

Suburban Rural School Division (1997). SRSDC 1997–2000 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (1997). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report  
1996–1997.

Suburban Rural School Division (1996). SRSDC 1996–1998 Strategic Education Plan.

Suburban Rural School Division (1996). SRSDC Annual Education Results Report  
1995–1996.

Suburban Rural School Division (1995). SRSDC 1995–1998 Strategic Education Plan.

**Appendix B**

**A comparison of family income among schools in SRSDC - 2011**

|                 | Average<br>Income | % of Families<br>with Income<br>less than <<br>\$40 000 | % of Visible<br>minorities | % of Families<br>with Income<br>less than <<br>\$40 000<br>2006 |
|-----------------|-------------------|---|----------------------------|---|
| Urban SC County |                   |   |                            |   |
| BFH             | 146 274           | 2.5   | 3.7                        | 9.0   |
| BWD             | 141 120           | 3.3   | 4.4                        | 9.1   |
| CLB             | 101 929           | 9.4   | 4.3                        | N/A   |
| FRH             | 151 371           | 2.6   | 3.5                        | N/A   |
| GLN             | 128 480           | 3.0   | 2.0                        | 9.2   |
| LLR             | 125 841           | 0.0   | 4.1                        | 10.3  |
| MHV             | 113 625           | 3.7   | 2.8                        | 17.3  |
| PIN             | 140 194           | 5.7   | 5.1                        | 20.3  |
| SWH             | 149 385           | 5.9   | 5.5                        | N/A   |
| SAL             | 125 924           | 6.4   | 4.8                        | 16.2  |
| WBF             | 97 859            | 14.4  | 6.1                        | 21.5  |
| WHF             | 138 499           | 4.8   | 4.3                        | 9.7   |
| WBO             | 101 659           | 8.6   | 4.2                        | 20.0  |
| WYE             | 182 866           | 0.1   | 3.0                        | 5.5   |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|                     |         |       |     |      |
|---------------------|---------|-------|-----|------|
| SC Urban Average    | 127 858 | 5.0   |     |      |
| Rural SC County     |         |       |     |      |
| AEL                 | 145 819 | 2.1   | 1.1 | 17.2 |
| AJS                 | 135 919 | 2.2   | 1.5 | 16.3 |
| FTV                 | 149 048 | 1.6   | 3.2 | 17.3 |
| MIN                 | 131 469 | 0.1   | 1.9 | 15.1 |
| UNC                 | 117 387 | 2.3   | 2.2 | 16.5 |
| Rural SC Average    | 135 928 | 1.7   |     |      |
| FS Area             |         |       |     |      |
| FSE                 | 95 960  | 17.6  | 2.4 | 35.6 |
| FJH                 | 103 091 | 11.7  | 2.5 | N/A  |
| FHS                 | 103 204 | 11.78 | 2.5 | 22.2 |
| JMW                 | 114 831 | 7.3   | 1.8 | 13.7 |
| WFG                 | 107 850 | 8.1   | 3.0 | 14.5 |
| FS Average          | 104 987 | 11.3  |     |      |
| LM and MIN Counties |         |       |     |      |
| AND                 | 92 568  | 19.5  | 0   | 54.8 |
| ALH                 | 71 400  | 15.7  | 0   | 44   |
| BRU                 | 102 705 | 2.3   | 0   | 31.3 |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|                |         |      |     |      |
|----------------|---------|------|-----|------|
| LME            | 101 355 | 12.1 | 1.9 | 31.9 |
| LHS            | 98 890  | 9.5  | 1.3 | 31.6 |
| MUN            | 72 888  | 19.5 | 0   | 46.1 |
| VJS            | 70 819  | 15.7 | 1.1 | 44.1 |
| <hr/>          |         |      |     |      |
| LM/MIN Average | 89 968  | 13.5 |     |      |
| <br>           |         |      |     |      |
| SRSDC          | 120 602 | 7.2  | 3.1 |      |
| <hr/>          |         |      |     |      |
| Alberta *      | 100 819 |      |     |      |
| Canada *       | 79 102  | N/A  |     |      |
| <hr/>          |         |      |     |      |

\*From the National Household Survey 2011 <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E>

**Appendix C**

**A comparison of family income among schools in SRSDC**

**1996**

|                  | Average Income 1996 | % of Visible minorities |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Urban SC County  |                     |                         |
| BFH              | 74 738              | 2.1                     |
| BWD              | 72 362              | 1.9                     |
| CLB              | 65 425              | 3.4                     |
| FRH              | 74 737              | 2.4                     |
| GLN              | 81 551              | 2.1                     |
| LLR              | 66 506              | 3.0                     |
| MHV              | 71 233              | 3.3                     |
| PIN              | 64 015              | 2.5                     |
| SWH              | 66 775              | 2.6                     |
| SAL              | 66 736              | 2.8                     |
| WBF              | 64 989              | 3.1                     |
| WHF              | 72 064              | 2.3                     |
| WBO              | 64 015              | 3,4                     |
| WYE              | 75 063              | 2.9                     |
| Urban SC Average | 70 015              |                         |
| Rural SC County  |                     |                         |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|                     |        |     |
|---------------------|--------|-----|
| AEL                 | 64 989 | 2.0 |
| AJS                 | 65 095 | 1.6 |
| FTV                 | 73 598 | 1.1 |
| MIN                 | 56 629 | 1.3 |
| UNC                 | 60 955 | 0.9 |
| Rural SC Average    | 64 253 |     |
| FS area             |        |     |
| FSE                 | 50 497 | 1.1 |
| FJH                 | 59 615 | 1.6 |
| FHS                 | 59 597 | 1.6 |
| JMW                 | 72 361 | 3.8 |
| WFG                 | 65 277 | 0.5 |
| FS Average          | 61 469 |     |
| LM and MIN counties |        |     |
| AND                 | 34 935 | 0.1 |
| ALH                 | 39 376 | 1.4 |
| BRU                 | 54 344 | 0.5 |
| LME                 | 39 376 | 1.1 |
| LHS                 | 43 516 | 1.4 |
| MUN                 | 34 935 | 2.3 |
| VJS                 | 38 935 | 1.7 |
| LM/MIN Average      | 41 747 |     |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|         |        |
|---------|--------|
| SRSDC   | 61 276 |
| Alberta | 57,735 |
| Canada  | 56,629 |

<http://www.ccsd.ca/factsheets/fsavin96.htm>

**Appendix D**

**A comparison of achievement levels among schools in SRSDC (2014)**

|                 | 2014       |           | Previous 3-yr average |           |
|-----------------|------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|
|                 | Acceptable | Excellent | Acceptable            | Excellent |
| Urban SC County |            |           |                       |           |
| BFH             | 90.5       | 23.3      | 87.7                  | 20.4      |
| BWD             | 89.7       | 30.9      | 86.6                  | 24.6      |
| CLB             | 85.6       | 26.8      | 84.8                  | 27.8      |
| CMP             | 81.5       | 13.9      | 88.4                  | 21.7      |
| FRH             | 79.0       | 21.7      | 78.9                  | 18.8      |
| GLN             | 92.1       | 35.7      | 94.7                  | 36.3      |
| LLR             | 88.4       | 28.6      | 86.8                  | 26.3      |
| MHV             | 84.5       | 15.5      | 93.2                  | 28.0      |
| PNE             | 94.5       | 40.0      | 92.8                  | 29.9      |
| SAL             | 85.5       | 17.4      | 82.0                  | 15.5      |
| SCA Dip         | 89.2       | 20.2      | 90.7                  | 28.5      |
| SCA Pat         | 93.6       | 38.6      | 95.2                  | 38.0      |
| SCE             | 97.3       | 46.2      | 97.4                  | 51.6      |
| SWH             | 78.3       | 26.2      | 83.9                  | 19.4      |
| WBF             | 85.8       | 31.1      | 83.0                  | 27.6      |
| WBO             | 87.5       | 25.0      | 84.7                  | 19.5      |
| WHF             | 85.2       | 24.9      | 91.0                  | 25.9      |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

| Rural SC County |      |      |      |      |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|
| AJS PAT         | 86.0 | 27.8 | 86.6 | 22.7 |
| AJS DIP         | 94.3 | 27.0 | 92.5 | 23.3 |
| AEL             | 81.2 | 15.0 | 85.4 | 18.6 |
| FTV             | 83.3 | 27.5 | 87.5 | 30.1 |
| MIN             | 66.7 | 27.8 | 66.2 | 26.4 |
| UNC             | 88.9 | 31.5 | 89.8 | 23.0 |
| WYE             | 95.3 | 53.2 | 92.9 | 39.8 |
| City of FS      |      |      |      |      |
| EPE             | 70.8 | 8.3  | n/a  | n/a  |
| FSH             | 83.4 | 11.3 | 79.9 | 11.7 |
| FSE             | 82.3 | 17.7 | 88.2 | 20.3 |
| FSC             | 90.4 | 32.6 | 90.5 | 27.6 |
| JMW             | 90.6 | 23.4 | 85.8 | 25.8 |
| RHJ             | 82.6 | 23.3 | n/a  | n/a  |
| WIN             | 85.3 | 35.3 | 87.4 | 40.2 |
| LM County       |      |      |      |      |
| BRU             | 91.7 | 25.0 | 72.1 | 7.3  |
| LME             | 89.5 | 6.1  | 86.1 | 19.2 |
| LHA PAT         | 65.0 | 14.5 | 67.4 | 12.1 |
| LHS DIP         | 92.0 | 9.8  | 74.6 | 10.9 |
| MC County       |      |      |      |      |

A STORY OF EQUITY AND SCHOOL CHOICE POLICIES: THE NEED FOR CAUTION

|         |      |      |      |      |
|---------|------|------|------|------|
| AND DIP | 90.9 | 9.1  | 76.2 | 10.7 |
| AND PAT | 48.8 | 2.4  | 69.5 | 11.5 |
| ALH     | 60.0 | 5.2  | 75.6 | 16.6 |
| MUN     | 87.7 | 26.3 | 85.5 | 20.1 |
| VJS PAT | 80.1 | 18.0 | 76.3 | 17.0 |
| VJS DIP | 89.6 | 24.1 | 87.7 | 22.2 |

## Appendix E

### Sample Interview Questions

- What has been your experience with the school choice policies in SRSDC?
- How would you describe the various approaches to choice over the years in SRSDC?
- What are the benefits and costs of school choice in SRSDC? What are the benefits and costs of school choice generally?
- What drives school choice policies?
- What were the drivers of change to the choice approach in SRSDC during the time period in question?
- How do SRSDC school choice policies align with other school divisions?
- What have been the impacts of the various approaches to school choice?
- In your opinion, what factors influence the choice process for families?
- What are the transaction costs associated with choice (fees, transportation, and length of time choice granted)?
- What type of choice programs are (or should be) available to parents?
- Describe the selection processes associated with each school of choice approach? What are the benefits? What are the impacts (consider school and family)?
- What types of parental support were made available to parents for each of the three phases?
- What types of support were made available to principals for each of the three phases?