

Edmonton Journal

The ABCs of a school revolution

Edmonton educators built North America's "most imitated and admired" school system plank by plank, by overcoming fierce resistance and entrenched attitudes

By David Staples (10/19/03)

EDMONTON - If someone were to tell you that Edmonton, Alberta, has the best public schools in all of North America, would you believe them?

Could a school district where class size, teacher salaries and government funding are such controversial issues, just as they are in so many districts, also be the model public school district?

Yes, say numerous experts. In the past few years, a consensus has been reached that nobody does it better than Edmonton.

The latest praise comes from the Oct. 13 issue of Time magazine, where Edmonton Public is called "the most imitated and admired public school system in North America."

As a result of a series of revolutionary reforms here over the last three decades -- open boundaries, school-based budgeting and alternative programs -- Edmonton has become "the hottest trend" in education, reports Time.

School systems in Seattle, Cincinnati, Houston, New York and British Columbia are all copying Edmonton. "The radical changes aren't without controversy, as institutions tend to change at a glacial pace," reports Time. "But given the irrefutable results in Edmonton, many underperforming schools may find themselves with this new lesson plan."

Remarkably, praise for Edmonton Public comes from all points on the political spectrum.

On the left, Karen Beaton, a longtime union leader, teacher and principal at Edmonton Public, says if Edmonton school trustees ever tried to go back to the old system, where central office, not schools, controlled budgets and made most

decisions, teachers would be furious. "It would be difficult to do our jobs unless we were involved in the decisions that affect us and our classroom."

On the right wing, Claudia Hepburn, a researcher at the Fraser Institute, rates Edmonton Public as the top public system in Canada, mainly because it is so responsive to parents. "They're fantastic," Hepburn says of Edmonton schools. "They provide much greater satisfaction for parents ... And surely public education is here to serve the public, and not to serve its own bureaucracy... ."

At the centre of the spectrum, journalist and ex-teacher Andrew Nikiforuk, a leading critic of public education and Calgary dad who has one child in public school, one in private school and one in home-schooling, says: "Edmonton is a really fascinating example of how to reinvigorate public education and kill the private sector (schooling) at the same time. ... It's a very sophisticated, very flexible, very student achievement focused system."

Edmonton Public has also been recognized in the United States. In May 2001, *The School Administrator*, a U.S. publication for principals, superintendents and trustees, took the unprecedented step of devoting an entire issue to describing the Edmonton model.

"It struck me that showcasing Edmonton as a model for school systems in this country would be of real value," editor Jay Goldman said at the time.

"There are great lessons in Alberta that we could learn here in the centre of the universe," said Patrick Rutledge, then a trustee of the Toronto district school board. "It's OK to think outside the box, but it's even better to do outside the box."

Seattle and Houston were the first U.S. districts to adopt Edmonton's methods, Seattle in 1995, Houston in 1999. Both were losing students and top teachers and principals to private schools. Those trends have now been reversed.

Perhaps the most important plaudit for Edmonton Public comes in a new book, *Making Schools Work: A Revolutionary Plan to Get Your Children the Education They Need*, by UCLA management studies professor William Ouchi. As Ouchi describes it, the revolution that began in Edmonton in the 1970s enabled the system to avoid the sickness that infects so many public school districts across the continent.

In his research, Ouchi visited more than 220 public schools across North America. He found they were defined by their sameness, their inefficient top-down management structures, and their falling enrolments.

In most districts, teachers do only what they're told, with the equipment they're told will work. If something goes wrong, everyone at the school, including the principal, feels powerless. Many parents feel they have no choice but to put their

children into private schools. These same parents then compound the problem by lobbying for resources to be shifted from the embattled public sector to the private one.

This dynamic hasn't occurred in Edmonton, Ouchi says, and it's why, after reading his book, many superintendents have called him, saying they want to give the Edmonton model a try.

"They're desperate," Ouchi says. "Their students are failing. They can't get their achievement numbers up. They can't get their attendance up. They can't get their graduation rates up. The unions are fighting them, the parents are angry at them, the mayors and governors are criticizing them. They're just beset from every side, and they see Edmonton and they say, 'My goodness, this makes so much sense. ... It's not some crazy idea.' "

The basic premise of the Edmonton revolution was to flip the power structure of the school system upside down. Decision-making power was shifted from the central office to the front lines – the schools and the parents.

Instead of central office telling the parents where their kids would go to school, the parents would tell the schools. And instead of teachers and principals doing the bidding of administrators, the administrators would do the bidding of teachers and principals.

It sounds simple, but it was extremely difficult to achieve. The revolution's two key leaders, Mike Strembitsky and Alan Parry, had to overcome decades of institutional inertia, blinkered thinking and the self-interest of those who were winners under the old system.

Parry wasn't too surprised that the winners would put up a fight. What he didn't expect, though, was the scope of the resistance from those who would be newly empowered, Edmonton Public's principals and teachers.

The imperative to change grew out of the frustrations felt every day by hundreds of Edmonton teachers, principals and parents over many years.

One such incident occurred in September 1960 when Strembitsky, then a young social studies teacher, was preparing a unit on the causes of the First World War, but realized his maps of Europe had yet to be mounted on his classroom wall. Strembitsky complained to his principal, who said he'd sent a work order to maintenance staff at central office, so he'd done all he could. When Strembitsky himself called up maintenance, he was told there was a backlog of work orders. In Edmonton's cold climate, the maintenance staff did outside work during the warmer months of fall. They would have to wait three months for the job to be done, they said.

So Strembitsky went to his own school custodian to borrow some tools so he could mount the map himself. "No way," the custodian said. "Teachers don't get tools. And as a custodian I can't do that kind of work. It's a maintenance job."

In the end Strembitsky, using his own tools, drilled holes in the concrete block walls, plugged the holes and mounted the maps. He taught the unit on schedule.

Three months later, however, a maintenance man showed up at his class, holding a work order. When the worker saw the maps already mounted, he threatened to report Strembitsky to the union. Strembitsky only placated the worker by showing him the work had been done correctly and by signing the work order, saying that the worker had accomplished his task.

Such was the joy of a centrally administered system.

If a teacher wanted something done, he or she usually had to win approval from three or four people at central office. For instance, a school would go to the library specialist at central office for books, but had to go to the finance department to pay for them and to the maintenance department for shelving. In the end, stacks of books often sat on the floor for months.

Anywhere along the line, someone could kill a request. Worse, though, was the endless waiting for decisions.

Union leader Karen Beaton, who started teaching at Edmonton Public in 1968, says she was never asked what books or supplies she needed; they would just arrive at her class. "It was always an irritation. We didn't blame the principal, though, because it was also accepted that nobody asked the principal what was needed."

- - -

Teachers traded horror stories about central office bungling. They blamed the administration, but at the same time were careful not to complain too loudly, believing that if they didn't keep the administrators happy, they might suffer for it.

Supplies would show up at a school that really didn't need them, but the principal would keep them anyway, says board trustee George Nicholson, who worked as a teacher and principal at Edmonton Public.

"If you didn't take it, you wouldn't get anything to replace it, so there was no incentive not take it."

One principal at a new school noticed a large pond had formed in a low area of the schoolyard, presenting a danger to his young students. His requests to get

the pond filled in went unanswered until, out of frustration, he sent in a requisition for a rowboat.

An unhealthy dynamic developed. Teachers and principals were forced to play the victim, buttering up administrators and manufacturing sob stories about how such-and-such an item or service was needed at school or everything would fall apart.

At central office, meanwhile, the administrators had to make sure they didn't spend too much money.

"It was our job (at the schools) to ask for things," Strembitsky says. "It was somebody else's job to make sure we were solvent. This set us up for confrontation."

The system made little sense to Strembitsky, who came from a small business background. "Please the customer," was his motto, something he'd learned working for his dad at the family's feed mill in the farm town of Smoky Lake, 70 kilometres northeast of Edmonton. If the price and the service weren't right at the mill, customers would go elsewhere.

It occurred to Strembitsky that the business model could work at Edmonton Public. Known as a perfectionist, he honed his management skills in the 1960s by working his way up to be a principal, then an administrator in central office, but also by running a large hog farm.

In his dealings, he came across as an average Joe, an amiable guy, says school historian M. A. Kostek, author of *A Century And Ten: The History of Edmonton Public Schools*. But Strembitsky was always calculating. "When you're talking checkers to him, he's playing chess, and he's two moves ahead of you," Kostek says. "But he hides this with his humility."

In 1969, Strembitsky became an assistant to Edmonton Public superintendent Rolland Jones. Under Jones, relations soured between the school board, the administration and the teachers, Alan Parry says. Everything was stalled by feuds and inertia.

"We were getting clogged," Strembitsky says. "Very crudely put, the system was becoming constipated."

In 1972, Jones left for North Carolina. The board replaced him with Strembitsky, who at 37 was young enough to offer hope of a fresh start but old enough to have 17 years of experience in the system.

- - -

The first plank of the Edmonton revolution, open boundaries, was driven by a pressing need. With Edmonton's population explosion came a shortage of schools in the expanding suburbs. The board couldn't build quickly enough. At the same time, as families left for the suburbs, older inner-city schools were becoming empty.

Instead of closing these older schools, Edmonton Public decided to open up school boundaries. Previously, the vast majority of parents could only send their child to their designated neighborhood school. Under the new plan, students could attend any school they wanted, provided there was space.

The open boundaries plan faced some opposition from district principals, but in 1974 Strembitsky brought it in. As well as easing the demographic crunch, the policy had a huge side benefit, adding accountability to the system. Before, when parents had little or no choice, the only thing that promoted quality education was the professional integrity of the staff and monitoring from central office. Now, if parents were unhappy with their local school, they could send their children elsewhere.

At one school, central office repeatedly told the principal to be more flexible and less bossy, but the principal hadn't listened. In 1974, the first year of open boundaries, the principal's school lost 125 students. "He got the message that day," Strembitsky says.

The next year the same school lost 75 more students. After that, the principal adapted and the school started to pick up students.

There were fears that attendance would drop rapidly at schools in poor neighborhoods, where parents who could afford it might move their children to a supposedly superior school in a wealthier area.

This fear has been realized in other school systems with open boundaries, such as in England, but it didn't happen in Edmonton.

Some Edmonton Public schools have fallen into the doldrums over the years, but rather than punish those schools, Edmonton Public worked with them, providing extra funding and ensuring that every school met the needs of its particular community, says Larry Booi, past president of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA).

"That's the part I like about the Edmonton approach best. ... Edmonton Public has done extremely good work in the inner-city schools."

Most teachers supported open boundaries from the start, though Strembitsky did hear that at one union meeting an unhappy teacher from a struggling school pushed for the ATA to go on record as opposing the policy. At that point, the

story goes, another teacher, who was also a parent, stood up and said, "I can empathize with your problems of operating a small school. But, as a parent, I would never again be in a situation where I had no choice."

- - -

The second plank of the revolution -- alternative programs -- also was introduced in 1974. To encourage students to attend older, inner-city schools, the board allowed for a small number of alternative programs at those schools. French immersion, Ukrainian bilingual and an alternative learning program were the first.

Parents had been clamoring for these programs for years, Strembitsky says, and rather than quarrel with the parents and possibly lose their children to private schools, he was glad to offer them. "I did not like to fight people, and when you put people in a straitjacket, you tend to get confrontations ... I was trying to respond to the pressures coming at me."

Some of the alternative programs were controversial. Many teachers objected to allowing religious schools into the public system. The first, Talmud Torah, a private Jewish school, came in 1975, billed as a Hebrew-language school. Several decades later, a handful of private Christian schools joined Edmonton Public.

Churches, mosques and synagogues are the correct place for religious teaching, not schools, says the ATA's Larry Booi, who fears that each religion will want its own school in the public system. "What we end up doing is creating segregated societies that undermine the whole idea of social cohesion."

But Strembitsky, who set the precedent by admitting Talmud Torah, had no such qualms. He says Talmud Torah handed over governance to the public board, allowed non-Jews to enroll, and agreed not to have religious instruction during the school day.

"If people want something that defies the public values, then so be it, let them pay the extra shot and go private. But we were in the business of public education and, to me, public education meant that we should be able to encompass everybody. They pay their taxes. We should be able to serve them."

The number of alternative programs has grown steadily at Edmonton Public, the biggest spurt coming in the 1995-96 term, when the Alberta government decided to permit charter schools, governed by parent boards, and to partially fund students who went to private schools.

To thwart the charter and private schools, Edmonton Public refused to rent any space to a charter school and recruited parents who wanted to start charter schools, encouraging them to set up alternative programs at Edmonton Public.

Emery Dosdall, who succeeded Strembitsky as superintendent in 1994, made it his goal that every Edmonton child should attend a public school.

"This is not rocket science," Dosdall has said. "Serve your customers and they will remain in the system. If you do not satisfy them, someone else will."

The 81,000-student Edmonton Public now has 29 alternative programs, located at 80 of the board's 200-plus schools, with programs for ballet, hockey, soccer, Mandarin, Arabic, Spanish, performing arts, International Baccalaureate, aboriginal culture, girls only, military history and Christian education.

At first, the ATA feared that Edmonton Public might be a kind of holding tank for private programs that were public in name only, but that hasn't happened, says Karen Beaton, president of the ATA's Edmonton local. All teachers are in the union. The schools are all governed by the board, which appoints the principals. Every student can enter a program if they're academically qualified. Generally, the programs aren't segregated but are housed within neighborhood schools.

Through the 1990s, Edmonton Public gained students, while private school attendance in the city shrank, a sharp contrast to the situation in Calgary, where choice and open boundaries weren't priorities in the public system. Calgary Public lost several thousand students, even as that city grew rapidly.

There are now 27 private schools in Calgary, just 14 in Edmonton. The Calgary area's top academic schools are private, but not so in Edmonton, with Edmonton Public's Old Scona being the top-ranked school in achievement tests in the province.

The full effect of open boundaries and alternative programs has been staggering. In the early 1970s, roughly 98 per cent of public school students went to their neighborhood school. That number is now below 50 per cent, with 48 per cent of elementary, 54 per cent of junior high and 62 per cent of high school students attending a school outside their neighborhoods

So popular are open boundaries that parents would revolt if the board ever tried to drop them, Beaton says. "Parents would batter down walls."

- - -

School-based budgeting, the most radical and controversial part of the Edmonton revolution, was the brainchild of Alan Parry, an ex-British paratroop officer turned systems planner.

Parry had worked in the planning office of the Edmonton public school board through the late 1960s, before moving to Ottawa to work for the Department of Regional Economic Expansion. He'd come to believe that most bureaucracies

were controlled by well-meaning specialists and administrators, who built empires and shut out any serious input from their underlings -- the masses of harried men and women on the front lines who actually dealt with the public.

Parry doubted anything would ever change, but in January 1973, Strembitsky offered him a chance to orchestrate a revolution. "You blaze the trail," Strembitsky told Parry. "I'll fly cover."

There was no obvious model for Parry and Strembitsky to follow, but they were guided by one strong notion, that while Edmonton Public had excellent teachers and principals, they had to be included in decisions so they'd be more committed to making the system work.

"I wanted people to have pride and ownership in their work," Strembitsky says.

But how to do it? After much slogging, Parry hit upon the idea of budgeting. Change the flow of the money, he realized, and everything else would follow.

As the system existed, roughly a dozen departments at central office doled out money to each of the district schools. The schools had control over none of it. To change this dynamic, Parry came up with a plan to survey each school about how much money they'd like to spend in each area -- maintenance, libraries, administration, etc. But when he presented this plan at central office, management told him there was "no goddamn way" they'd send out such a survey.

"They didn't want any interference," Parry says. "They had maps in their heads of how the world should work, and they'd been working that way for the last 50 years."

In retrospect, Parry isn't surprised by the reaction. "Why would a guy with four aces want to change? The people in the centre made all the decisions and the lesser mortals out in the schools carried them out."

But neither Parry nor Strembitsky accepted this position. "The only thing I wouldn't accept for an answer was, 'It's because that's the way we do it around here,' " Strembitsky says.

To get around central office inertia, Parry and Strembitsky created a pilot project, a small parallel system of public schools run by completely different rules. Seven schools were taken out of the main system. Their share of the total budget was determined, then split up. The principals and teachers then decided how to spend their money.

Strembitsky and Parry saw several advantages to the new system. First, principals and teachers knew their school and their students best, and if given

the chance they could likely make better spending decisions than central office could. Second, rather than having to wait endlessly for central office to decide on a matter, teachers could go to the principal and be told yes or no.

The reform itself was described variously as school-based budgeting and school-site decision-making, the premise being that school staff should make decisions on what they know best, and that central office should do the same.

After splitting the money, the seven principals asked Parry about the rules for spending. He said they couldn't violate union rules or the Criminal Code. Other than that, they were free to budget. "That frightened the hell out of them because they had been used to being told how to do things for such a long time," Parry says.

Throughout the district, many expected the principals at the pilot schools would fritter away their funds. One month before the school year started, a visibly upset administrator from the finance department rushed into Strembitsky's office and flung a requisition form at him. "There, I told you it would happen!"

Strembitsky looked at the form, which had Lynnwood elementary ordering a Selectric typewriter. He didn't understand the administrator's upset, which only made the man more angry. The administrator explained that according to regulations, elementary schools could only have 12-inch manual typewriters, while junior highs got 15-inch manuals, and high schools got 15-inch electrics. But only central office could have a Selectric, equipped with interchangeable type spheres.

- - -

"The idea that an elementary school in 1976 could have a typewriter with a bouncing ball just blew the guy's mind," Strembitsky says. "I felt like propelling him out of my office with my left foot, but that's not leadership. So I said to him, 'They may be ordering a typewriter of the quality reserved for central office but they're going to have to do without something else, because they now have a bottom line.' "

In the end, most of the seven pilot schools proved to be extremely conservative in their spending. Only a few principals made big changes. Dick Baker at M.E. LaZerte found that if his high school used less paper, hired secretaries part-time, and had the students do groundskeeping, then two additional teachers, two support staff and an extra custodian could be hired. The assistant principal position was also eliminated so there'd be more money for student counseling.

This caused concern at both central administration and at the ATA. While M.E. LaZerte had increased its number of counselors, Lynnwood elementary eliminated counseling positions in favor of having more teachers. How could one

school be allowed to do something exactly opposite of the other? How could they both be right?

"And we said, 'No, the only thing that is wrong is imposing one formula on every school,' " Parry says.

Over the years, several principals at Edmonton Public have made some questionable decisions, such as one who took his entire staff for a weekend retreat at the posh Jasper Park Lodge.

But the corruption that is rife in U.S. education is all but nonexistent within school-based budgeting systems like Edmonton's, writes Ouchi, the UCLA professor. "If the money is allocated to the schools, there are many pairs of eyes watching how every dollar is spent -- parents, teachers and students all care about every dollar, because they have good use for the money."

This careful scrutiny isn't seen at many large, centrally administered districts where "stealing, padded overtime payrolls and hiring of friends and relatives who don't work are rampant," says Ouchi.

- - -

By 1978, the success of Edmonton's pilot project was apparent. Parry pushed to take it systemwide, but Strembitsky wanted news of the early success to spread first. "I have a saying," he says. "Teachers convince teachers. Principals convince principals. Secretaries convince secretaries. And the superintendent convinces nobody."

In 1979, the ATA conducted a survey, which concluded that teachers opposed school-based budgeting. Teachers feared budget planning would take too much time. They worried that disparities would arise with the new allocation system, that some schools wouldn't get what they needed. And they were concerned that principals would make all the decisions, freezing out the teachers. A major problem was that the system didn't require principals to consult with teachers, says the ATA's Booi.

Not all teachers were against the new policy, though. When University of Alberta professor Brian Caldwell surveyed teachers and principals at the seven pilot schools, he found they loved the changes.

Parry and Strembitsky realized the new system wouldn't just rein in central office, it would also check the power of the teachers union. When power was concentrated at central office, the union could negotiate with a single party, the board, for control. But this wasn't how Strembitsky and Parry wanted it. "The union no more knows how to run the schools on a day-to-day basis than does the central administration," Strembitsky says.

Under the new system, with principals and teachers having more decision-making power, the union leadership was less able to direct matters, Strembitsky says. "This doesn't mean there isn't a need for a union. But the teachers became more selective in the kinds of things they would back the union in."

School-based budgeting was also opposed by many principals. At one meeting, a principal told Parry the new system would destroy his old way of doing things. He was tight with his teachers, he said, mainly because every time the school had to do something he knew the teachers wouldn't like, he just told them the "ding dongs" from downtown had made him do it.

Most upset were principals who had managed well in the old system, using their contacts at central office to get extra funding for their schools. That extra money would now disappear.

For the new allocation system, a committee hit upon the idea of having a certain amount of dollars allotted for each student, based upon that student's needs. The more students you had, the more money you'd get. In the long run, this policy pushed schools to be welcoming to new students. "When we attached the dollar signs to the pupil, when a school saw a pupil coming they saw nothing but additional opportunity arriving at the door," Strembitsky says.

In December 1979, the Edmonton public school board voted 6-2 to take school-based budgeting systemwide. Parry and Strembitsky were thrilled, though they did share one concern with the teachers, that not all principals would readily consult with teachers and parents.

A big problem was that most principals were older men promoted under the old top-down system. They weren't used to making major budget decisions, let alone involving their teachers.

To monitor the principals, Strembitsky brought in an annual district-wide survey of parents, teachers and principals, asking them all what they thought of the changes. "We knew that if we gave principals the say-so, sooner or later we would get someone who wasn't doing it right, so we had to have information, and this was the way to get it."

Some teachers, including Karen Beaton, quickly came around to the new system. In 1980, for the first time, she and her colleagues were able to pick out the books they wanted for their classes. "To be asked what tools I would need to do my job was quite thrilling, actually," she says.

The positive feelings soon became more pervasive. In 1985, a survey of 1,000 Edmonton teachers and principals showed the majority of teachers and an overwhelming majority of principals would recommend school-based budgeting

to other jurisdictions. That same year, the ATA endorsed school-based budgeting province-wide.

Teachers came to expect a role in school decisions, Beaton says. If they had a complaint now, it wasn't about the end result of a decision made higher up, it was that they'd been denied a say in that decision.

Rigorous training was brought in for new principals, each of them having to take a 20-week course and each assigned a mentor in his or her first year. A new generation of principals took over, versed in school-based budgeting and keen about the concept. "It took a long time for that kind of thinking to get going, but once it got going, when you met any principal from the Edmonton school district, they were true leaders," Nikiforuk says. "They are outgoing, they are engaging, they know their stuff and they're very focused."

Most other school districts have a hard time finding qualified principals, The School Administrator reports, but not Edmonton, where every vacancy is hotly contested by both local candidates and those from other cities and provinces.

In Strembitsky's last years and through the Dosdall era, 1994-2001, more budgeting decisions were shifted from central office to the schools. Schools came to control their own maintenance. Most signed up for maintenance packages from the central office, very much like property management agreements, with the schools retaining control over what happened and when. With the principals calling the shots, no longer would loud maintenance work be done during school hours. Principals also started to ask for refunds on work that wasn't done well.

In a bid to encourage energy savings, schools were allowed to pay their own power bills. In the program's first year, schools that had opted to do this cut their utility costs by 12.6 per cent, savings they could use for other budget items. In comparison, the rest of the district schools, which hadn't opted in but had still committed to reducing utility costs, cut their power bills by 5.3 per cent.

Another shift came when schools were given funds to buy whatever services they wanted from consultants at central office -- the district psychologists, social workers and specialized staff. Some consultants found themselves very much in demand. In other areas, however, there was suddenly fewer calls, and those workers were retrained and reassigned.

In the end, 92 per cent of the district budget was controlled by the schools, far higher than in any other North American school district. With the principals running their schools, superintendent Dosdall and his successor Angus McBeath were free to refocus the system on student achievement. Alberta students now rank near the top in international achievement tests. Student performance in

provincial tests for Edmonton Public in Grades 3, 6 and 9 show steady improvement.

"If student achievement is your number one objective, site-based management is the way to go at it," McBeath has said.

"If somebody tried to remove the basic structure of school involvement, then we would have a real revolution," Strembitsky now says. "The system has been internalized by staff, by principals and by the community. It's not that there aren't problems, but given the alternative of going back to the system that was, nobody would have it."

- - -

So Edmonton is number one. The final question, it would seem, is: Why here? Why Edmonton first, rather than some noted educational centers such as New York, London or Toronto?

A number of factors are responsible, namely attitude, competition and leadership. Many credit Edmonton's nature. "Edmonton is a can-do place," Parry says.

"It's a city of mavericks and great thinkers and people who aren't afraid to do things differently," Nikiforuk says. "And it's a very community-minded place that believes strongly in the importance of public education."

Edmonton's oil patch and agricultural roots set a certain tone here, Ouchi says. "Those are all businesses that encourage people to be very, very self-sufficient and very independent."

Edmonton Public was also spurred on because of competitive pressure from the city's strong separate school program, which is about one-third the size of the public system. "That was a really credible threat," Ouchi says.

The fact that the ATA is a mild and co-operative body compared to other teachers unions is another key, Nikiforuk says. Unions in Ontario or B.C. would never have co-operated. "They would have fought tooth and nail."

Finally, the leadership of Dosedall, McBeath, Parry, and, most of all, Strembitsky, was crucial.

"Mike Strembitsky was critical," says Parry, now 66 and retired in Nova Scotia. "It couldn't have happened without him."

Karen Beaton agrees. "He greatly respected and trusted the people in the schools being able to make decisions. That was the major change. ... We just

simply all worked together over the years and it evolved into a pretty fine school district."

After leaving Edmonton, Strembitsky worked at a Washington, D.C., educational think-tank. He's now back, writing a book about the Edmonton revolution.

The key to the whole thing, he says, was simply taking action. "We didn't invent the ideas. What we did was implement them, and I put a strong emphasis on 'we.' I can't think of anything I was able to ram or push through without a high level of support.

"People say it happened in Edmonton because of Strembitsky, but that's an insult. We didn't do anything in Edmonton that other jurisdictions couldn't do. This is no Strembitsky thing. This is a thing that every kid needs. And if we don't do it, then education really is going to be only for the privileged."

Looking back, Strembitsky says he gloried in the work, as long and hard as it was. He's reminded of a question someone once put to Oiler superstar Mark Messier before the Stanley Cup playoffs: Was Messier worried about rough play and how his uniform was going to get all bloody and sweaty?

"I'm looking forward to it," Messier replied.

"That's what it was all about for us," Strembitsky says. "For us, it was worth doing."

So is he the Mark Messier of superintendents? "No, no. I'm not going to say Mike Strembitsky. But Edmonton is now known for Wayne Gretzky, West Edmonton Mall and Edmonton Public."