

A System View of
Continuing and Distance Education Services
School District 57, British Columbia

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Introduction

Public education institutions are complex organizations. In today's changing world, administrators are "faced with increasingly more complex and pressing problem situations, embedded in interconnected systems that operate in dynamically changing turbulent environments" (Banathy, 1995, p.53). The economic and technology changes of the last ten years have rapidly changed the delivery of education in general and distance education particularly. For administrators faced with survival in these often-chaotic conditions, a systemic view of their organization aids in revealing its key components, functionality, outside influences, purpose, and ability to meet its mandate. Continuing and Distance Education Services, School District 57 in British Columbia is one such institution undergoing chaotic change. The systemic view of CDES provided in this paper, reveals "a complex, open, and dynamic human activity system that operates in ever-changing multiple environments in interactions with a variety of societal systems" (Banathy, 1995, p.56). This systemic approach provides clarity and is revealing.

Background

School District 57 (SD57) is the second largest school district by geographical size in the province of British Columbia (see Appendix A). It encompasses 52,000 square kilometers (20,000 square miles), and includes the communities of Prince George, Mackenzie, McBride, Valemount, and Hixon with all of the communities and settlements in between. The district's student school-age population in 2003 is 16,400 students, of which 2,900 are aboriginal. SD57 operates 37 elementary schools, 1 middle school, 2 junior secondary schools, and 8 secondary schools. They range in size from Bear Lake Elementary, with 20 students, to Prince George Secondary School enrolling approximately 1,500 students. The district offers a wide range of traditional and alternative programming options. In the last two years, SD57 has undergone major challenges with the closure of 14 elementary schools and faces the closure of two junior secondary schools this year. The district experiences the challenge of a significant decline in enrolment due to regional economics and demographic changes.

Continuing and Distance Education Services (CDES), School District 57 (SD57), in Prince George, British Columbia was created September 1, 2003 with the amalgamation of three educational organizations. CDES is a school with a broad mandate for delivery of educational services to diverse student populations. First CDES provides Continuing Education (CE) adult basic education programs K-12 for communities within SD57 and educational support for additional specific programs within Prince George. Within its CE mandate, it provides continuous intake, self-directed, self-paced courses with face-to-face support. It maintains a main school site, with satellites in two additional locations within Prince

George. It carries the additional responsibility of providing educational services to the Provincial Correctional Institution and other community initiatives not included under the umbrella of Community Alternate Programs. Secondly, CDES carries a mandate for Community Alternate Programs (CAP) consisting of 14 different programs for street youth, youth at risk or youth in special circumstances scattered throughout the city of Prince George (see Appendix B). Third, CDES is home for the Central Interior Distance Education School (CIDES) with the mandate of providing distance education (DE) services to students in School Districts 27, 28, 49, 57, 91 (see Appendix A). CDES is a member of the provincial Distance Education Consortium comprised of the nine provincial distance education schools. In addition, CDES operates a well-established and expanding International ESL summer program with home-stay students from Japan. Finally, CDES is responsible for the delivery and administration of SD57's summer school program. Today CDES is one of the largest schools in SD57 with an administrative structure of principal, 2 vice-principals, 60 teaching staff, and 29 support staff. Teachers holding joint duties with CE and located throughout the CE sites, provide DE 11-12 online course support.

CDES is physical housed in a widely dispersed number of locations throughout Prince George (see Appendix B). It consists of a main office housing the administrative center for all activities, a F2F CE facility, the DE administrative staff and shipping facilities, CE and DE counseling services, and a small library. In addition, CDES has a satellite a face-to-face (F2F) CE center in the Prince George Hart area, 14 Community Alternate programs housed separately and scattered throughout Prince George, and a combined satellite F2F CE and K-10 DE support center in the vacant Gladstone elementary school in the Prince George College Heights area. In addition, CDES maintains F2F satellite support centers in the towns of McBride and MacKenzie.

The CDES System

A systems view can be macroscopic or microscopic providing increasing levels of detail. Creating a system view of CDES requires decisions as to what level of detail to include. Additionally, it is advantageous to fit CDES into a structural framework while developing a system view of it. Fortune and Warson (1994) provide such a framework with their "Formal System Paradigm" (p.16). The following clarifies the depth of detail chosen and the nature of the CDES system so that it can be represented using the Formal System Paradigm, in enough detail to provide a representative system view of the school.

1. Definition

Continuing and Distance Education Services is a public school in School District 57, Prince George, British Columbia providing educational opportunities for students of all ages, with diverse educational goals and needs, that require various levels of support.

2. Components of the System

The main components of the system are:

- a) the decision-making subsystem comprised of the administrative team: principal, 2 vice-principals, technical analyst, and business manager. One vice-principal is responsible for CAP programs and one is responsible for CE and DE programs. The technical analyst is responsible for decisions regarding choice, implementation, and maintenance of all computer hardware, software and networks. The business manager is responsible for the finances of the school and clerical staff.
- b) the performance monitoring subsystem comprised of: School Plan for Success, School Planning Council, School Advisory Council, Parent Advisory Committee, and Parents. The Ministry of Education mandates the implementation of a School Plan for Success created through involvement of all stakeholders and that sets out strategies to improve students' intellectual development and other areas of student achievement, such as human and social development, and career development. Conforming to ministry guidelines the school has a School Planning Council that consisting of three parents, a teacher and the principal. Its responsibility is improving student success by examining and affirming the School Plan for Success. The Parent Advisory Council that meets monthly represents parents of CDES students and provides a direct voice to administration and the wider system as well. Parents continually provide feedback to all parts of the system. The School Advisory Council consisting of representatives from all department subsystems provides a means of communication and feedback to administration regarding operations.
- c) the transformation subsystem consisting of four major subsystems (divisions): Continuing Education services, Distance Education services, Community Alternate Program services, and Clerical services. Three are divided into additional subsystems. The CE subsystem consists of the following “peer systems” (Cookson, 1998, p.7): Math/Science, Humanities, Upgrading, ESL/Start, CE Counseling services. The DE subsystem consists of the following peer systems: K-7, 8-10, 11-12, DE Counseling. The Clerical subsystem consists of office staff and staff responsible for maintenance and distribution of learning resources.

3. Components in the Environment

Cookson (1998) speaks of eight general environmental factors in detail. For simplicity of this analysis, the critical environment for CDES focuses on the Ministry of Education, the Distance Education Consortium, the economy, population, political climate, competing schools and distance education organizations throughout British Columbia and emerging trends in education.

4. The Wider System that influences the CDES System

The wider system is the School District to which CDES is a subsystem. It has a profound impact on CDES. School District 57 (SD57) determines the organizational configuration and the sphere of influence of CDES. It provides funds, resources, and administrative directions to CDES, and its own vision for the future of CDES. The School District sets goals and expectations for CDES and monitors the CDES School Plan for Student Success.

5. System Inputs and Outputs

There are two inputs into the CDES system. The first input is students of all ages, with diverse educational goals and needs, requiring various levels of support. The second input is parents with goals for their child. The output from the system is students who have successfully attained their educational goals and have felt supported in the process. The second output is satisfied parents.

6. Variables of the System

The variables of the system are the number of students registering in the various programs at CDES; the Ministry's funding formula; the funding decisions at the District level; and the number of teachers, counselors, and clerical staff available to provide educational services and support.

7. Relationships between the Components

CDES influences the Distance Education Consortium that in turn influences the Ministry of Education. Distance Education Consortium decisions and initiatives influence CDES directly. The Ministry of education audits CDES, determines distance education policies for the school, and has expectations through policy that the school must meet and maintain. Twenty-six schools and districts now offer distance education-electronic learning program in the province of British Columbia. These school can and will compete for students with CDES. The economy affects funding and population, and population in turn affects student enrollment.

8. Relationships between the Variables

Student enrollment and Ministry funding formulas determine the funds available for staffing levels.

Analysis

Figure 1 visually summarizes the foregoing analysis. The creation of figure 1 revealed two weaknesses in the Performance Monitoring subsystem. First the need for and the creation of a School Advisory Council was overlooked in the chaotic merger that formed CDES and the events and initiatives that CDES was required to undertake. The discovery of that missing component and its immediate creation resolved conflicts emerging in the chaos of change at CDES. Secondly, there is no means of

feedback into the Performance Monitoring subsystem for adult students. This too needs resolution as soon as possible.

Summary

Continuing and Distance Education Services is a complex, dynamic, human activity system (Fortune and Warson, 1994). This system operates in an ever-changing environment and interacts with a variety of additional systems. The process of applying the Formal Systems Paradigm to CDES aids looking through the complexity to provide clarity.

References

- Banathy, B.H. (1995). Developing a systems view of education. *Educational Technology* (May/June), 53 – 57.
- Fortune, J. & Warson, L. (1994). Systems paradigms. In *Systems Paradigms, Studying System Failures*. UK: The Open University

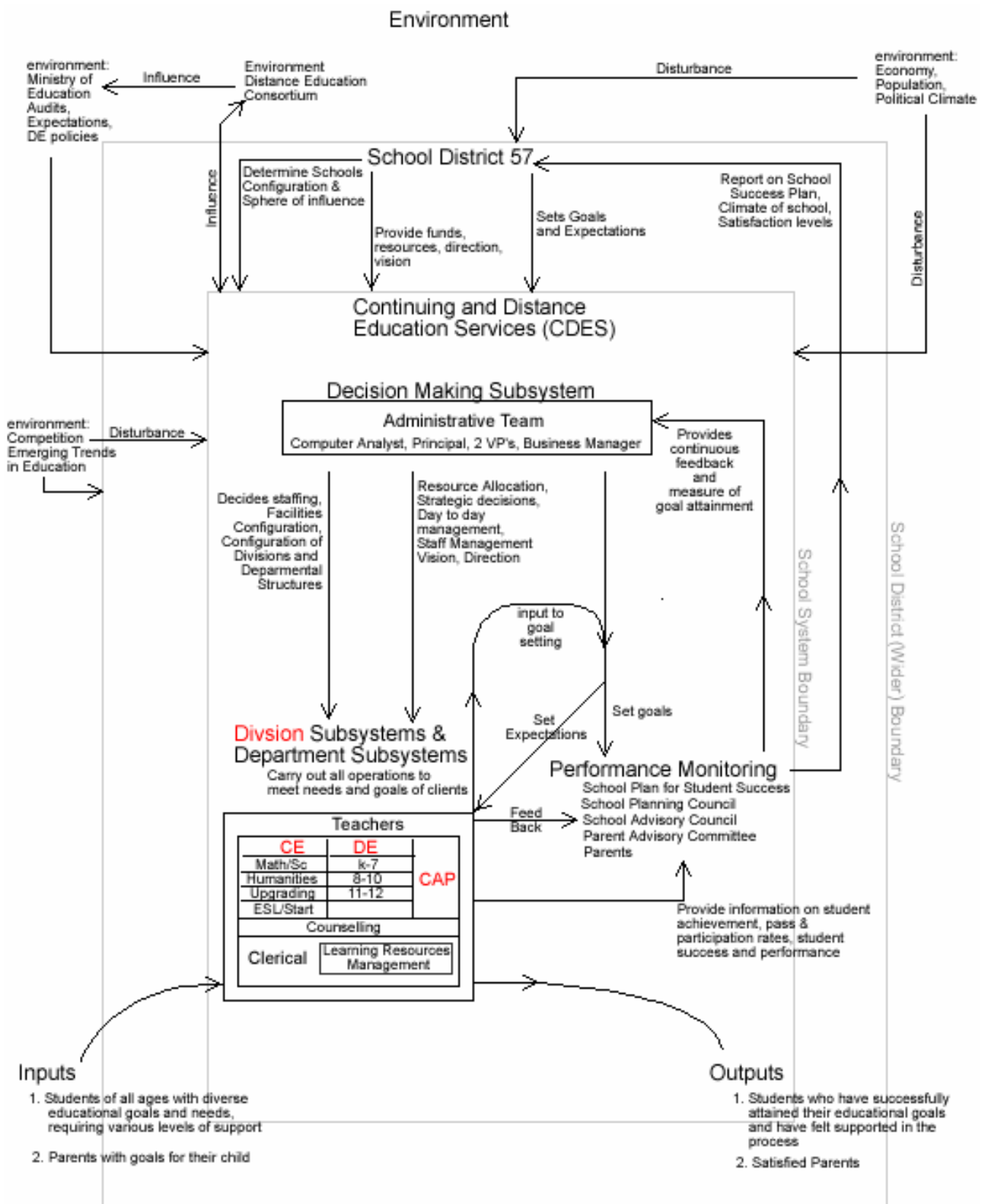
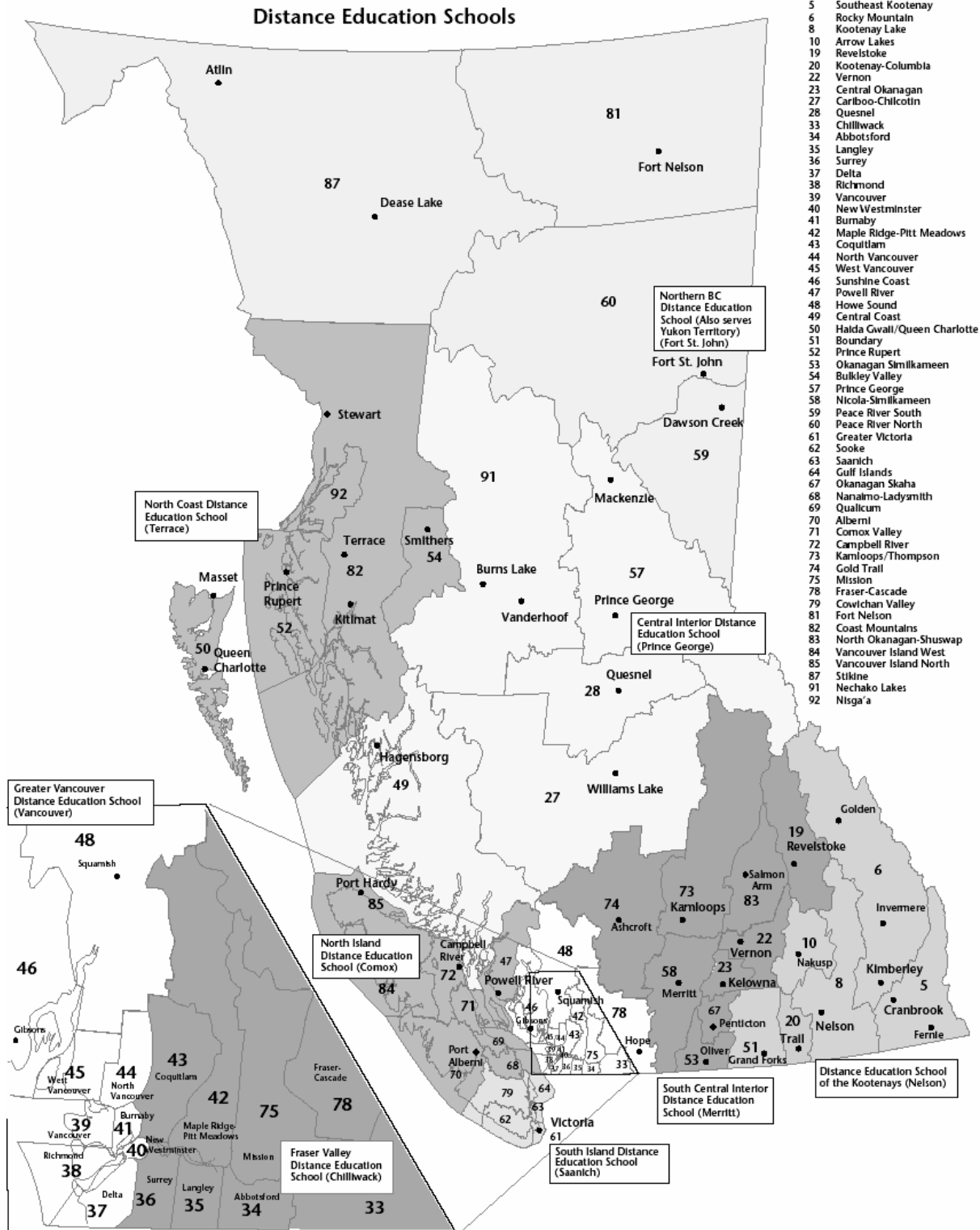


Figure 1. Application of the Formal System Paradigm (Fortune & Warson, 1994, p.16) to Continuing and Distance Education Services.

Appendix A

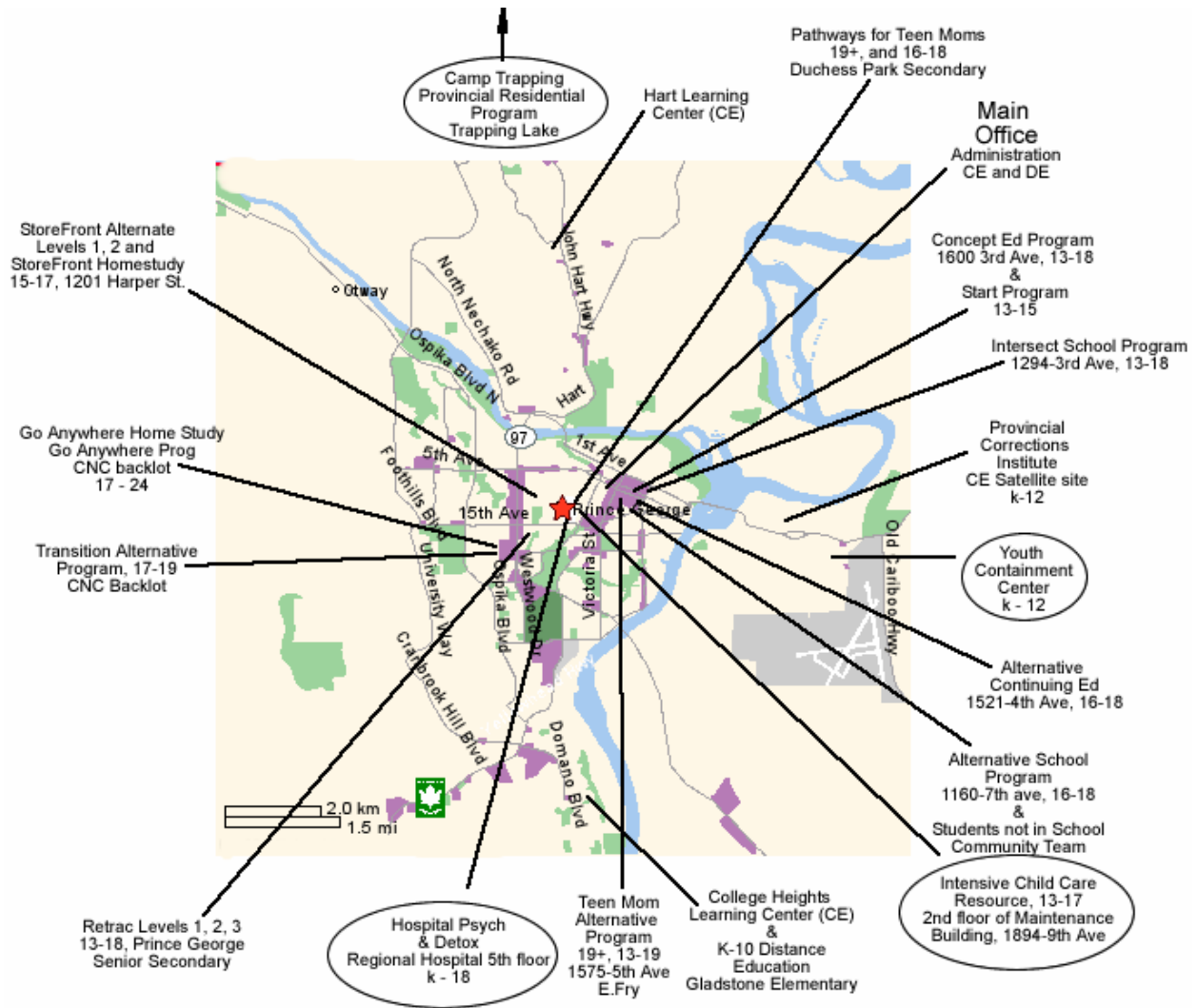
Regional Map of School District 57 (SD57) and for the Central Interior Distance Education School (CIDES) covering School Districts 27, 28, 49, 57, and 91.



Source: Ministry of Education, Distance Education K-12 Guidebook, 2003-2004

Appendix B

Program Sites and the Satellite CE facilities of CDES



Notes:

Not shown is the satellite F2F CE center in McBride, B.C.
 Circled sites are Provincial Resource Programs, funded differently, and students do not appear in CDES school enrollment figures.