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SCHOOL CHOICE

A Policy Whose Time has Come



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The Frontier Centre for Public Policy has established a program of research and commentaries that focuses on education policy, called the Education Frontiers Project (EFP). Its objective is to examine and communicate policy changes within our education system that will make it more sensitive to the needs of its clients and more effective in its performance. A main theme of the Centre's work is creating greater transparency and neutrality within all public services. In the field of public education, this means measuring results, building the case for the efficacy of standards testing in our schools, and improving curricula by returning to the cultivation of basic literacy and numeracy skills. The project also examines the arguments and evidence for increasing the range of school options by considering the different education methods and models and comparing educational achievement across provinces and between countries.

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School Choice: A Policy Whose Time Has Come

Executive Summary

- ◆ The world-wide trend in education is generally moving towards more choices for students and parents. Among countries embracing the trend are New Zealand, Britain, and the United States. Approximately 2700 charter schools have opened in the latter, and research demonstrates that most of them have been very successful.
- ◆ Alberta is the only Canadian province that has enacted charter school legislation, with a total of 10 such schools currently in operation.
- ◆ Charter schools are public schools, in that they employ certified teachers, teach the provincial curriculum, are open to all students within their mandate, are publicly funded and do not teach any religious faith or doctrine.
- ◆ Alberta's charter schools have had good results. In particular, the Aurora Charter School and Foundations for the Future Charter Academy have high parental satisfaction rates, strong student performance on standardized tests and lengthy waiting lists for entry.
- ◆ In British Columbia, a significant movement towards traditional schools is taking place, with eight such schools currently open for students.
- ◆ Traditional schools have proven quite successful in B.C., with evidence of strong student performance, high parental satisfaction rates and lengthy waiting lists. In particular, Langley Fundamental has been teaching for more than 25 years and is considered to be a leader.
- ◆ Edmonton's Public School Board has over 30 programs of choice for its 80,000 students and plans to diversify even more in the future. This policy started in the 1970s and, since 30% of elementary students and 52% of secondary students are enrolled in specialized programs, it is clear that there is significant demand for this form of choice.
- ◆ Manitoba enacted a Schools of Choice Act in 1997. While this means that students can enroll in any public school of their choice, the policy has had little impact on the programming options available to students. Manitoba school divisions have chosen not to create optional programs, but have stuck with the status quo.
- ◆ Since programs of choice are completely dependent on the political whims of individual school boards, simply giving boards the authority to expand programming is not an adequate reform. Charter school legislation is the best means to ensure the extension of school choice to all parents without the political constraints of local school boards.

Introduction

The Canadian public school system is in the midst of substantial change. New curricula are being introduced, different programs offered and higher standards demanded. Parents and students alike have become increasingly aware of the importance of a "solid education." This awareness has translated into ever-increasing expectations from public schools.

While the majority of Canadian students attend public schools, a growing minority attends private schools or is being home-schooled. The fact that a significant number of parents have rejected public education should be a cause of concern to public educators. In addition, many choose to supplement their children's education with private tutoring offered by proprietary schools like Kumon and the Sylvan Learning Centres.

Some provinces, particularly British Columbia and Alberta, have made significant changes to their public schools to make them more responsive to the needs of parents and students. In 1994, Alberta revised its Education Act to permit the creation of charter schools. Since then, approximately a dozen charter schools have been formed, and most of the ten that survived the difficult start-up phase are growing and have substantial waiting lists.

In addition, some school boards in both Alberta and British Columbia now allow parents and teachers to create special-focus public schools. Specialty schools include hockey schools, schools for the gifted, schools for the disabled, Christian schools and “traditional” schools. The latter, which emphasize basic academics and teacher-centred instruction, have proven to be extremely popular with parents.

Notably, these examples of change are all taking place within the public system. These alternative schools work as part of the public education, not in competition with it. In fact, by embracing these types of reforms the public system is empowered to cope with the dual challenges of home-schooling and private schools. If the public school system is going to remain relevant, it needs to become a model of flexibility—not bureaucracy.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are best described as independent public schools. In order for them to form, public authorities must pass laws permitting their existence and setting up a process for the granting of charters. The charter law specifies the circumstances under which a charter can be requested, the group or groups eligible to sponsor a charter, and any avenues of appeal if an initial charter application is rejected.

Although charter schools are largely independent of the structures that govern regular public schools, they still operate under the public school umbrella. They must be open to the general public and are not allowed to charge tuition fees.¹ While some groups have alleged that charter schools are private schools in disguise,² they are clearly structured as public schools.

Charter Schools in Other Countries

Charter schools have become extremely popular in a number of western democracies. Britain currently has approximately 1,100 grant-maintained schools teaching about 20% of Britain's schoolchildren, while every single public school in New Zealand is chartered.³ New Zealand's example is significant in that the government provides bulk funding to each school and allows school administrators to decide where to allocate resources. Most principals believe that this has created enhanced learning opportunities for students.⁴

When one considers the extent to which the American education system and its ideas have impacted Canadian public schools, the charter school experience in that country is especially significant. The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991, and 38 other states have since allowed their formation. Approximately 2,700 charter schools currently exist in the United States, with a total student population of 684,000.⁵

Research in the United States demonstrates a marked improvement in learning among charter school students. A study recently published by the Center for Education Reform analyzed 65

¹ Joe Freedman, *Charter Schools in Atlantic Canada: An Idea Whose Time Has Come* (Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, 1997).

² Canadian Teachers Federation, *Ten Charter School Myths*.

³ Freedman, op. cit.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ US Charter Schools, www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/gi/overview.htm

objective research-based studies which evaluated charter school performance. Of these studies, over 93% concluded that charter schools have been “innovative, accountable, and successful.”⁶

In the context of such success, the disappointment of charter school proponents with the small-scale implementation of such options in Canada is understandable.

Charter Schools in Canada

In 1994, Alberta became the first and only province to enact charter school legislation.⁷ Since that time, a total of twelve charters have been granted, and ten remain operational.⁸ As with public schools, charter schools were designed to be non-sectarian, not charge tuition fees, and be accessible to all students who fit within the parameters of the schools’ charters. In addition, they are required to hire only certified teachers, follow the Alberta curriculum, and ensure that their students write the Alberta provincial standardized exams.⁹ They are public schools in every sense.

The following chart provides a breakdown of basic facts about each of these ten charter schools.^{10 11} More detailed information about two of these schools follows.

School	Location	Year Founded	# of Students	Grades Offered	Special Focus
ABC Charter School	Calgary	1996	600	K-8	Gifted students
Almadina Charter School	Calgary	1996	320	K-9	English as a Second Language
Aurora Charter School	Edmonton	1996	383	K-9	Traditional Academics
Boyle Street Education Centre	Edmonton	1995	75	4-12	At-risk youth
Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE)	Medicine Hat	1995	137	1-9	At-risk youth
Foundations for the Future Charter Academy	Calgary	1997	700	K-11	Traditional Academics
Moberly Hall Charter School	Fort McMurray	1997	80	1-8	Adapting learning styles

⁶ The Center for Education Reform, *What the Research Reveals About Charter Schools*, 2001.

⁷ Jose da Costa, Frank Peters, and Claudio Violato, *Achievement in Alberta’s Charter Schools: A Longitudinal Study* (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2002).

⁸ Lynn Bosetti, et al, *Canadian Charter Schools at the Crossroads*, (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2000).

⁹ Costa, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bosetti, op. cit.

New Horizons Charter School	Edmonton	1995	121	K-9	Gifted education
Science Alberta Charter School	Calgary	1999	300	4-8	Mathematics and Science Education
Suzuki Charter School	Edmonton	1995	111	K-6	Music Education

Analysis

The above chart illustrates that charter schools differ substantially not only in size, but in the nature of their various missions. Two of them, Foundations for the Future Charter Academy and Aurora School are analyzed in more detail below. Since these schools focus on providing instruction to “average” students, have some of the largest student populations, and operate with broad admission policies, they provide the best comparisons with regular public schools.

Aurora Charter School

Edmonton’s Aurora Charter School received its charter from the Alberta government in 1996. It has 383 children in Grades K-9 and focuses on “providing a structured, orderly, teacher-directed classroom environment to average children so that they may succeed in an academically rigorous program.”¹² There are two classes per grade and class sizes are capped at 22. All students are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, although preference is given to siblings of students currently enrolled at Aurora.¹³

Student performance at Aurora has been excellent. On standardized provincial evaluations, its students have generally performed at a higher level than other local schools and had better scores than the provincial average. In Language Arts, Aurora students outperformed the provincial average and other local schools by 3-18%, depending on grade level. Similar results were noted in Mathematics. Grade 9 students, however, outperformed other schools by 10-15%. In Science and Social Studies, Aurora students outperformed the provincial average and other local jurisdictions by significant margins.¹⁴

In addition, surveys conducted among parents, students, and teachers at Aurora have indicated very high levels of satisfaction with the school. Most students would recommend the school to their friends and parents are generally happy with the education their children are receiving. Considering Aurora’s lengthy waiting list (about 660), it is apparent that it has developed a positive reputation in the community.¹⁵ Aurora Charter School is also in a strong financial situation. An independent report on the school’s progress stated that it has demonstrated effective long-range planning, careful budgeting and a great deal of attention paid to the long-term viability of the school.¹⁶

¹² Costa, op. cit.

¹³ Stephen Cymbal, *Aurora Charter School: An Evaluation*, 2000.

¹⁴ Costa, op. cit.

¹⁵ Cymbal, op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Foundations for the Future Charter Academy

Foundations for the Future Charter Academy (FFCA) was granted its charter in 1997 and has expanded from one campus with a small number of students to four campuses with approximately 700 students.¹⁷ FFCA's mission statement is similar to Aurora's: "To develop students who master skills and knowledge, build confidence through competence, and demonstrate character and respect, in a structured environment where performance is measured."¹⁸

In order to achieve these goals, FFCA provides a traditional education with an emphasis on basic skills. Teachers are expected to use direct instruction, explicit phonics and multi-sensory techniques. In addition, students and teachers are required to adhere to a strict dress code and to participate in a character development program.¹⁹ Class sizes are capped at 25 students.²⁰

Student performance at FFCA is also similar to that at Aurora. Standardized assessments have placed students at either equivalent or higher levels than students in other local jurisdictions. FFCA students generally outperform students in neighbouring divisions by 10-20% in Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts.²¹

Surveys conducted among parents, students, and teachers indicate a great deal of satisfaction with the school. Of parents surveyed, 84% stated that they intended to keep their children in FFCA for as many years as it is open while 61% of students stated that they would recommend FFCA to their friends.²² Most areas of dissatisfaction involved a lack of adequate facilities, a problem which FFCA has been working to address.²³

Approximately 4400 parents have children on FFCA's waiting list,²⁴ a clear indication that FFCA has a strong reputation in the community.

Charter Schools Summary

The fact that Alberta is the only province to enact charter school legislation makes it impossible to compare charter schools across Canada. Research indicates, however, that charter schools are filling an important education niche in that province.²⁵ Since students in charter schools generally outperform the provincial average, the schools have high parental and student satisfaction rates, they are continually expanding and have substantial waiting lists, it is not difficult to conclude that in other provinces there might be a latent demand for this sort of school choice.

Traditional Schools in British Columbia

¹⁷ Foundations for the Future Charter Academy, www.ffca-calgary.com

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Costa, op. cit.

²² Bosetti, op. cit.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Costa, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibid.

While the creation of alternative public schools is less widespread in British Columbia than in Alberta, it most certainly exists. A number of districts in British Columbia have responded to parental requests for traditional elementary and middle schools. A total of eight are currently in operation.

Traditional schools have a special focus on basic academics and utilize a highly structured, teacher-directed method of instruction. Different areas of subject matter are kept separate and grade-level splits occur only when necessitated by student numbers. Traditional schools generally have a strong focus on phonics and teach math in a sequential manner.²⁶ Students are held to firm academic standards, participate in a character development program, are subject to a strict dress code and are expected to complete regular homework. These schools also expect a significant amount of parental involvement. Since these qualities are more reminiscent of schools in the past than of today's schools, the word "traditional" is used. The phrase "back to the basics" is another common description.

The following chart provides basic information on each of the traditional schools in British Columbia.^{27 28 29 30} Two of these schools will then be described in more detail.

School	School District	Number of Students	Grades
Anniedale Traditional School	Surrey	170	K-7
Auguston Traditional Elementary School	Abbotsford	335	K-7
Central Fort George Traditional School	Prince George	190	K-7
King Traditional Elementary School	Abbotsford	360	K-5
Langley Fundamental	Langley	558	K-6
Langley Fundamental Middle School	Langley	245	7-9
Simpson Traditional Middle School	Abbotsford	183	6-9
Surrey Traditional School	Surrey	372	K-10

Langley Fundamental School

Langley Fundamental School is the result of the amalgamation of two earlier traditional schools initially established in the 1970s, now housed in a new school built in 1995. It originally served students in Grades K-7. In 1998, after Langley Fundamental Middle School was established, it limited itself to students in K-6.³¹ It has a total enrolment of 558 students.³²

²⁶ School District No. 57, *Central Fort George School*, www.sd57.bc.ca

²⁷ School District No. 36 (Surrey), www.sd36.bc.ca

²⁸ School District No. 34 (Abbotsford), www.sd34.bc.ca

²⁹ Langley School District No. 35, www.sd35.bc.ca

³⁰ School District No. 57, www.sd57.bc.ca

³¹ Daniel Brown, *The Impact of Parental Choice on Three Canadian Public Schools*, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 1999.

³² Langley School District, op. cit.

Teachers are expected to place a great deal of emphasis on academics. While they are permitted to utilize new pedagogical techniques, they must adhere to the educational philosophy of the school. Teachers and administrators frequently take pride in the fact that they do not take part in educational “fads” and only accept new methods once they have been proven to be successful.³³ Students and parents can expect a similar teaching style from one grade to the next.

The teaching methods employed at Langley Fundamental have some significant similarities with the charter schools previously discussed. Like its counterparts in Alberta, Langley Fundamental focuses on the development of literacy and computational math skills. Phonics are used extensively in its reading program and math is taught in a sequential, structured style.³⁴

Standardized achievement tests show that Langley Fundamental students score noticeably higher than the provincial average and other schools within Langley School District. Langley Fundamental Grade 4 students scored higher than other Langley school district Grade 4 students in Reading, Social studies and Science by 7.2%, 5.3% and 11.5% respectively. In addition, Langley Fundamental students scored a substantial 18.1% higher in Mathematics.³⁵

A strong emphasis on character education is another hallmark of this school. The school’s mission statement indicates that it will operate “within the framework of a strong commitment to standards and values foundational to our Canadian society.”³⁶ There is a strong commitment to orderliness and classes are generally quieter and more structured than in regular public schools. In fact, visitors have often commented on the contrast between the atmosphere at Langley Fundamental and other schools.³⁷

Discipline issues are relatively rare at Langley Fundamental. In the first ten weeks of one school year, a total of three discipline cases were referred to the principal—an extremely small number for a school with 550 students.³⁸ This is widely attributed to the school’s pro-active approach, through which students are taught why the rules are important. In addition, significant emphasis is placed upon respect for adults.³⁹

All traditional schools in British Columbia, including Langley, are schools of choice, where parents decide to enrol their children as an alternative to regular schools. Students are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, and parents have camped in front of the school for up to a week in order to ensure that their child is enrolled. The waiting list of over 600 indicates there is significant demand for this style of educating.

But Langley Fundamental remains a public school, open to anyone who applies. As with all other public schools in Langley School District, there are no tuition fees, religious beliefs are kept out of the classroom, all teachers must be certified and members of the British Columbia Teachers Federation, and the school is expected to adhere to all guidelines of the Langley School District.⁴⁰

³³ Brown, op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Langley School District, op. cit.

³⁷ Brown, op. cit.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

King Traditional School

King Traditional School was established in 1995 as a school of choice within the Abbotsford School District. Parental requests for a school with a rigorous academic program and a strict code of conduct provided the impetus for its establishment.⁴¹ Currently, King Traditional has 360 students in Grades K-5.⁴²

King Traditional is similar to other traditional schools, such as Langley Fundamental, with a strong emphasis on academics and homework. Teachers are expected to use teacher-directed instruction and to differentiate between subjects. Standards tests are used in order to ensure that learning is taking place.⁴³

In addition, students at King Traditional are expected to wear a prescribed school uniform and to adhere to a strict code of conduct.⁴⁴ Students are expected to rise and await instructions when adults enter the classroom. Outside observers have frequently commented on the orderly atmosphere in the hallways as well as in the classrooms. Even substitute teachers are generally treated with respect by students.⁴⁵

Parents of students at King Traditional have expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the school. This is demonstrated by the lengthy waiting list and by the fact that, like parents at Langley Fundamental, parents will camp out for a week prior to kindergarten registration in order to enroll their children. Parental surveys have indicated that they are pleased with the progress of their children.⁴⁶

Student performance on standardized achievement tests indicates that King Traditional students outperform other students within Abbotsford School District by a significant margin. Grade 4 students at King Traditional scored higher than other students in the district in Reading and Social Studies by 7.3% and 6.9% respectively. Unfortunately, King Traditional School was not yet in existence when the standardized Mathematics and Science assessments were administered. Preliminary results, however, show strong results in both these areas as well.⁴⁷

As with Langley Fundamental, King Traditional is a public school, subject to the same district regulations as all other schools and bound to follow the British Columbia provincial curriculum.⁴⁸ Religion is not taught in the school and no tuition fees are charged.⁴⁹

Traditional Schools in BC – Evaluation

Opposition to the idea of traditional schools appears to come from organized groups with a specific ideological agenda, such as the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA).⁵⁰ Organizations such as these claim that

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² School District No. 34 (Abbotsford), op. cit.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Brown, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ School District No. 34 (Abbotsford), op. cit.

⁴⁹ Brown, op. cit.

⁵⁰ Arlene McLean, *What's Wrong with Traditional Schools?*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 1998.

traditional schools are private schools in disguise and are a danger to pluralism and universal public education. They also argue that these schools favour students who have upper-socioeconomic backgrounds and parents who wish to escape from the diversity of the public school system.⁵¹

These statements are easily refuted. First, to reiterate, traditional schools are public schools operated and governed by public school boards in the same way as other public schools. They follow the provincial curriculum, refrain from teaching religion and do not charge tuition fees. Considering that the BCTF has commented positively on many other schools of choice within British Columbia,⁵² it seems inconsistent for them to single out traditional schools and charge that they are private schools. The mechanisms by which traditional schools are formed are the same as those used to create other schools of choice within British Columbia.

The other major objection rests upon the premise that traditional schools are made up of students from wealthy families and from relatively homogeneous cultural and religious groups. However, research has clearly shown that families who have children attending Langham Fundamental and King Traditional have *lower* than average annual incomes compared with students in other school districts.⁵³ In addition, both Langham Fundamental and King Traditional have a *higher* percentage of visible minority students than their respective district averages.⁵⁴ Obviously, these traditional schools do not have an overabundance of students from wealthy white homes. Rather, the data indicates the reverse.

Parents often do enroll their children in traditional schools because they are dissatisfied with the regular public system. Parents have indicated that public schools place too little emphasis on academics, use experimental teaching techniques that often do not work, are unstructured and disorganized and fail to provide a safe learning environment.⁵⁵ These are significant concerns.

Instead of blaming parents for wanting to “escape” from the diversity of public schools,⁵⁶ it might make more sense to address these concerns. Had the school boards not created these traditional schools, almost half of these parents would have opted to send their children to private providers or to home-school them.⁵⁷ In fact, traditional schools have had the effect of keeping students in the public system.

School Choice in Edmonton

Since the 1970s, Edmonton’s Public School Board has provided parents and students with an extensive array of choices. With an extremely large student population, 82,000 students in 200 schools, the board works with a large population base. Edmonton has an open boundary system—meaning that parents can send their children to any school within the division, providing space is available.⁵⁸ The school board even publicizes student achievement in different schools on Grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 tests and allows parents to have access to this information.⁵⁹

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² British Columbia Teachers’ Federation, *Public Choice Public Schools*, BCTF: 1996.

⁵³ Brown, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ McLean, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Brown, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Edmonton Public School Board, www.epsb.ca

⁵⁹ Heather Raham, *School Choice*, Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education: 1996.

Currently, there are approximately 30 different programs of choice which serve 30% of elementary students and 52% of secondary students.⁶⁰ These options include: aboriginal programming, hockey schools, traditional schools, French immersion, heritage languages, Christian schools, arts programs and science programs.⁶¹ Many parents take advantage of this wide latitude of options.

Opponents to such an expansion of school programs are inconsistent in their criticisms. In one pamphlet, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) states that charter schools are unnecessary because "public schools currently offer a wide range of alternative programs that respond to the needs of students within an inclusive setting."⁶² And yet, in another pamphlet, the ATA criticizes expanding schools of choice programs because they allegedly favour wealthy families and fragment the public system.⁶³ The ATA cannot have it both ways.

School Choice in Manitoba

In 1997, the Manitoba government officially enacted a policy called Schools of Choice. Under this policy, students may apply to attend any public school in the province even if they do not live within the school division. If another division accepts a student, the division where the student lives is required to send a portion of its funding for that student to the receiving division.⁶⁴

While this policy has led to some positive changes and increased choice for Manitoba students, it has significant limitations. Receiving school divisions are only required to accept applications of other students if there is space available in the preferred school.⁶⁵ If a division is experiencing any crowding in its own schools due to natural population growth, applicants will not be accepted.

In practice, this policy has only amounted to a minor shuffling of students from division to division. Most school divisions in Manitoba have similar structures, policies and programs. In order for the Schools of Choice policy to make a greater difference, school divisions would need to embrace program choices similar to that found in Edmonton's Public School Board. Their failure to do so simply means more of the status quo in Manitoba.

French Immersion in Manitoba

The number of students enrolled in French Immersion programs has increased dramatically since French Immersion started in Manitoba in the 1970s. With more than twenty-four school divisions in Manitoba offering French Immersion programs, 17,000 children in Grades K-S4 are enrolled in French Immersion (up from 216 in 1973).⁶⁶

Since 1995, French Immersion has been recognized as a program of instruction and has its own curriculum policy and graduation requirements. If school divisions are willing to allow parents to choose French Immersion for their children, why not offer even more programs of instruction?

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Edmonton Public School Board, op. cit.

⁶² Alberta Teachers Association, *Charter Schools*, 2002, http://www.teachers.ab.ca/peac/peac_pamphlets/Charter_Schools.htm

⁶³ Alberta Teachers Association, *Educational Choice*, 2002, http://www.teachers.ab.ca/peac/peac_pamphlets/Educational_Choice.htm

⁶⁴ Manitoba Education and Youth, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/schools/choice/index.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Manitoba Education and Youth, *French Immersion in Manitoba*, April 2002.

The success of French Immersion in Manitoba serves as an example of how successful programs of choice can be.

Analysis and Recommendations

It is clear that educational choice has taken many different forms in Canada. From the limited charter schools experiment in Alberta, the traditional schools movement in British Columbia, and the limited Schools of Choice policy in Manitoba, parents now have access to more educational options than at any point in the past. These conclusions are warranted from current experience:

- 1) Enacting a Charter Schools Act is the easiest, surest, and fairest way for governments to promote school choice.

Alberta's charter schools experiment has shown that there is a demand for school choice among parents. Considering that ten charter schools are currently operating successfully and that many of these have lengthy waiting lists, it is obvious that many parents want choices for their children. The main downside of Alberta's Charter Schools Act is that it is quite restrictive. Among other regulations is one that states that no more than 15 charter schools can exist at any one time.⁶⁷

In contrast, American states such as California and Arizona have flexible charter school laws and have 438 and 467 charter schools respectively.⁶⁸ By allowing parents the opportunity to create and have governance over their own schools, provincial governments would go a long way towards obtaining long-term achievement and accountability in the public school system.

Another advantage of charter school legislation that is flexibly written is that it can give parents an opportunity to start up their own schools. Rather than having to rely upon a school board having a similar philosophical mindset, parents who share other pedagogical values can seek a common recourse. While there may be less of a need for charter schools in a school division which actively promotes choice, such as Edmonton's, the same cannot be said of many less flexible divisions.

- 2) Traditional Schools have proven to be a particularly popular and successful school of choice. They have also helped keep many students in the public system.

The growth of traditional school alternatives in both British Columbia and Alberta have shown that there is a great deal of demand for this form of schooling. Many parents are frustrated with a public system that appears to have a different educational philosophy from their own. Traditional schools (and other alternatives) meet this objection head on by providing a more acceptable form of schooling.

As noted earlier in this report, many parents of students who attend traditional schools would have selected private schools or home-schooling had traditional schools not been available. Options such as traditional schools therefore can play an important role in keeping students in the public system. This effectively refutes the notion that traditional schools promote a privatization of education. The surest way to increase the number of private schools and reduce

⁶⁷ Freedman, op. cit.

⁶⁸ US Charter Schools, op. cit.

participation in the public system is to limit choices and attempt to force all parents and students to stay in one common system managed under one ideological perspective.

The limiting factor of traditional schools is that they exist entirely at the discretion of the individual school board. While school districts such as Abbotsford, Langley, Prince George, Surrey, and Edmonton may allow these schools to be created, the same cannot be said of most other school boards, even in British Columbia and Alberta. Most school boards have been hostile to the creation of traditional schools. Most applications to create traditional schools in BC were actually *rejected* by the school boards.⁶⁹

Simply enabling local school boards to create program choices among their schools is not enough. Considering the almost universal hostility of Canadian teachers' unions and most school boards, parents need another avenue. Flexible legislation allowing the establishment of charter schools is the only sure way to allow parents to circumvent hostile school boards in order to create schools that meet their needs.

- 3) The Schools of Choice policy in Manitoba has had only a minor effect in Manitoba. Without a more aggressive policy, school divisions will remain with the status quo in regards to programs of choice and parents and students will not be able to get the education they want.

Unlike Alberta and British Columbia, Manitoba has not created any significant programs of choice within its public education system. No traditional or charter schools have been established and most school divisions operate with the same programs as they did before the Schools of Choice Act was enacted. With the exception of French Immersion programs, the public school system makes very little choice available for parents and students.

If the Manitoba government would modify the Schools Act, it is considerably more likely that school divisions would become responsive to parental wishes for greater choice. Until then, it is unlikely that any major changes will occur. School boards already have the power to create programs of choice within their divisions and they have generally failed to do so.

Conclusion

There is abundant evidence showing that making greater choices available to parents and students is a way of increasing overall satisfaction with the public system. Until recently, the only option that most parents had if they were dissatisfied with the public system was to place their children in private schools or provide home-schooling. Making more school program choices available makes this recourse less likely.

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