



Is it time for more school choice in Ontario?

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While most Canadians value education, few are satisfied with its delivery. There is much talk about test scores and budgets, but in Ontario there is reluctance to engage ideas about how families can be better served by having more choices in education.

When the Ontario Progressive Conservatives who sit in opposition recently released their caucus white paper on education, it caused a stir. The central theme of the paper is to rein in spending on education, eliminate many non-teaching jobs, temporarily park the rollout of the very expensive full day kindergarten program, and realign teacher responsibilities under the Education Act. The Ontario PCs would also like to down-shift more responsibilities from school boards to individual schools, focus the curriculum on job skill attainment and continue expanding anti-bullying legislation.¹



Cutting jobs to trim the budget will always draw debate. But it might be time for a bigger dialogue about education in Ontario.

A truly bold proposal any party in Ontario could consider would be to re-examine how publically funded education is provided. Currently, Ontario funds English and French language education through public and separate school systems. Yet other Canadian provinces like British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba offer families greater choices through partially funding independent schools that uphold government mandated criteria. The province of Alberta has also had reasonable success in sanctioning charter schools.² Across Canada, various provinces also provide a small amount of financial and material support to families who choose to home school. Ontario does not need to look very far for alternative models for delivering quality education.

Why provide more delivery options in education?

Ontario families are already seeking alternative education options for their children. A 2010 IMFC study reported that enrolment at Ontario's independent schools is increasing while public school enrolment is on the decline.³ Unfortunately, parents who choose independent schools or who homeschool in Ontario pay twice – once for tuition and again through their taxes. This makes independent schools and homeschooling a more difficult option to exercise for many families. The partial funding models used in other provinces would increase the availability of independent schools to families of various income levels while allowing the Ministry of Education to regulate certain aspects of the education provided by these schools who accept funding.

While a number of variables contribute to educational success, allowing a variety of options for families has not harmed quality in provinces like Alberta. Students in Alberta consistently top those from other provinces on the OECD's programme for international student assessment.⁴

When Sweden introduced a school voucher program in 1992, independent schools were far from mainstream, but they have been comfortably integrated into the education system.⁵ Thomas Idergard of the Stockholm based think tank Timbro has reported that the per student cost of voucher funded independent schools in Sweden is lower than elsewhere in the education system. He argues, "Detailed analysis of cost items shows that independent schools spend a higher share of their revenues on education and teaching materials and are more efficient in managing other costs."⁶

Parents' right to choose their children's education

Parents are the primary educators and are best positioned to make informed choices about the kind of formal education arrangement their children engage in. Canada has demonstrated its support of this value when it signed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights that states in Article 26, "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children."⁷ Expanding options for families, even through partially funded options, would enhance this value in Ontario.

The educational climate in Ontario has not been favourable to expanding choice. Tax credits for tuition at independent schools was short lived during the 2000s and the existence of a separate school system has been debated in the public square in recent years. Despite these debates, Ontario parents are still seeking a variety of options when it comes to the delivery of education.

Publicly funded education need not be a one size fits all proposition. Advocating for more options would be a bold policy initiative in Ontario, but well within the Canadian experience. In Ontario, it appears that parents are already voting with their feet.

Endnotes

¹ Ontario PC Party. (2013, January). Paths to prosperity. Preparing students for the challenge of the twenty-first century. p. 7. Retrieved from <http://www.ontariopc.com/blog/thoughts-on-the-preparing-students-white-paper/>

² Milke, M. (2010, November 8). School choice in Canada: Lessons for America. Backgrounder no. 2485. Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/11/school-choice-in-canada-lessons-for-america>

³ Miedema, D. (2010, May 25). Why are Ontario parents leaving the public school system. eReview vol. 10, no. 9. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/why-are-ontario-parents-leaving-public-school-system%C2%A0%C2%A0>

⁴ Milke, M., School choice in Canada (2010), p. 8.

⁵ Lips, D. (2010, March 8). School choice in Sweden: An interview with Thomas Idergard of Timbro. Webmemo no. 2828. Washington D.C.: The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/03/school-choice-in-sweden-an-interview-with-thomas-idergard-of-timbro>

⁶ Thomas Idergard as quoted by Lips, D. School choice in Sweden, (2010, Mar. 8).

⁷ UN General Assembly (1948, December 10). The universal declaration of human rights, article 26, Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a26>