

By Bernie Froese-Germain

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

IN AN INTERESTING PIECE ENTITLED “An Epidemic of Education Policy: (What) Can We Learn From Each Other?”, Benjamin Levin at the University of Manitoba identifies several major trends in education reform observed across national as well as provincial and state boundaries. He suggests that the popularity of these trends is attributable less to a process of mutual learning through which governments analyze and learn from each other’s experience than to what he describes as “policy borrowing”. Levin correctly confirms that research seems to play an insignificant role in informing educational policy decisions.¹

Among these trends is the growing emphasis on the “economic rationale for education reform” — that is, education narrowly conceived to prepare individuals for the job market and nations for global competition. This trend is closely aligned with the move to view education as a market commodity and students and their parents as consumers of that commodity. Levin notes that school choice has become an important vehicle for driving this education market.² Kari Dehli at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education describes school choice as a market-driven education reform in which schools compete for students, placing choice in the broader context of government efforts to restructure education to comply with the imperatives of globalization.³

Characteristics of choice

A broad range of education-related policies are captured under the school choice umbrella — everything from open boundaries allowing students to change schools within and across school districts to charter schools and vouchers. Maude Barlow and Heather-jane Robertson identify a number of characteristics (both explicit and implicit) of choice initiatives observing

that, “despite their various manifestations, schools of choice, while varying in degree, ‘vary little in kind’ ”⁴:

- They are disengaged from any central authority, with decision-making concentrated at the school level, where parent-run boards wield much authority.
- At least some of the regulations regarding program, staffing, budget, etc., ordinarily under centralized authority, are in the hands of each school.
- Pupils are selected from among those who put themselves forward as candidates.
- Schools compete openly for enrolment.
- Funding is tied to the number of students each school can attract.
- To be financially successful, each school must adhere to the rules of the marketplace which dictate that, “for some schools to succeed, others must fail; for some students to succeed, others must fail.”
- Their goal is to be homogenous, using various filtering devices to sort their clientele, whether by socio-economic level, religious values or academic proficiency.
- School choice advocates view some combination of teachers/bureaucracies/unions as the agents of educational folly.⁵

International experience

In principle, choice initiatives are supposed to improve the quality of education and address inequities. By encouraging parents dissatisfied with their local school to “shop around” for a school that meets their child’s needs, schools are forced to compete with each other to attract students and funding.

Schools are said to improve by rising to the “market challenge”.⁶ However, the research on school choice taken from several countries, including Britain, the U.S. and New Zealand, paints a different picture of choice in practice. In the interest of promoting a little learning (and perhaps optimistically, as a possible antidote to the “policy borrowing” phenomenon described by Levin), important lessons drawn from the experience to date with school choice are summarized below⁷:

1 In *Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice*, U.S. education researchers Bruce Fuller and Richard Elmore (as cited in a Canadian Teachers’ Federation paper) examine the available empirical research on school choice and conclude that “‘increasing educational choice is likely to increase separation of students by race, social class, and cultural background.’” This finding also applies to those choice programs intentionally designed to reduce inequities in education “suggesting that good intentions cannot overcome the gravitational forces of competition applied to schools.” Indeed the motives of some choice proponents are all too clear — for John Chubb, co-author of *Politics, Markets and America’s Schools*, “the problem with public schools is that they ‘must take whoever walks in the door.’”

2 Also drawing on the work of Fuller and Elmore, Dehli notes that “there is no systematic evidence that competitive school choice environments improve student learning.” According to Levin who comes to the same conclusion, “the available evidence suggests that choice has no independent impact on student learning”. Of course, when high-achieving students are attracted by, and concentrated in, choice programs, the illusion

of increased achievement may well be created. Fuller and Elmore caution against “ ‘mistaking the effect of concentrating strong and motivated students for an effect of the school or the choice system.’ ”

3 For the most part, participation in choice plans is low with few parents actually choosing to switch their kids out of the neighbourhood school. Those parents who do take part in choice initiatives are generally more affluent, have higher levels of education and are more involved in their children’s schooling. Dehli tells us that “people in different social groups — rich and poor, for example — choose or are able to choose differently.” Simply put, it appears that those with more resources, whether money, information, influence or time, can take advantage of more choices.

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shifting the responsibility for finding the best school onto the individual ‘consumer’ (parent/student). Jane Gaskell (as quoted in a Canadian Teachers’ Federation paper) observes that “ ‘many who are opposed argue that ‘choice’ streams better students into ‘elite’ schools, draws families who might argue for better public schooling into alternatives that satisfy and quiet them, and ultimately increases the disparity in educational provision.’ ” Moreover, the hard work involved in making choices in a market-based system often falls disproportionately on the shoulders of women.⁸

and districts are particularly hard hit. According to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, “school-by-school competition creates high demand for the students who already have the greatest chance of success in our schools, and creates incentives to avoid serving harder-to-teach kids and kids with disabilities who may consume more than their ‘share’ of resources, yet not increase the school’s profile in key marketing areas such as standardized test scores.”

Choice systems undermine our collective responsibility for ensuring that every school is a good school and that every student receives a high quality education.

4 Parents make their school choice decisions on the basis of various criteria including safety, distance, availability of transportation, and the “familiarity and responsiveness” of the local school — according to Dehli, the nature of educational programs or a school’s academic reputation often play only a minor role in decision-making. Levin notes that “parents are ... concerned about the tone of the school, and whether their children will likely be happy there, be cared for, and so on” and that, not surprisingly, students with a say in the matter may choose on the basis of school friendships.

6 In a reversal on the concept of parental choice, some studies show that it is the schools which select their students rather than parents and students doing the choosing. Dehli states that “even when governments impose restrictions on the ability of schools to screen out minority students, poor children, ESL learners, and children with special needs, popular schools are nevertheless able to pick and choose ‘the best’ applicants.”

8 Market mechanisms have not led to innovation and diversity in educational programs. Rather, research on choice programs in England and Wales has shown them to be on the unimaginative side. According to Dehli, “when schools have to compete for students, they tend to adopt ‘safe,’ conventional and teacher-centered methods, to stay close to the prescribed curriculum, and to tailor teaching closely to test-taking”. In this regard the term “choice” is very much a misnomer. While the public school system has been criticized for its lack of options, in reality there is considerable choice within the existing system, choices which are long-standing and increasing. In addition to schools based on language of instruction and religious denomination, Canadian parents and students can select from among programs meeting the needs of at-risk, gifted, Aboriginal and older students to name a few. In a poll conducted by Vector Research and Development, the majority of parents expressed satisfaction with the amount of choice they could exercise with respect to schools and school programs.⁹

5 Choice systems undermine our collective responsibility for ensuring that every school is a good school and that every student receives a high quality education. They do this by

7 The ‘creaming off’ of motivated, high-achieving students and their more educationally-involved parents by choice schools is beginning to have a detrimental impact on neighbourhood public schools which are left with fewer students (those that are higher-risk and higher-cost) and hence fewer tax dollars. Smaller schools

9 Even the role of school principal is shifting — from instructional leader to manager “preoccupied

with budgets, image, and enrolments, and performance on standardized tests and external inspections” with “far less time for curriculum and teaching matters”.¹⁰

10 Among the proponents of school choice in Canada are right-wing think-tanks such as the Fraser Institute and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.

The Alberta experiment

Although Alberta’s experiment with school choice in the form of charter schools is only a few years old, it’s already starting to show serious cracks. Charter schools in the province have been experiencing difficulties, particularly with governance by their volunteer-run boards. The most serious case involves the Global Learning Academy in Calgary (the province’s largest charter) where the school principal was suspended and a trustee appointed by Education Minister Gary Mar to take his place. The report of a forensic audit ordered by the trustee in January to look into the school’s financial operations is still pending. In May the Minister announced that the school would be closing — Global Learning Academy’s 460 students will be forced to search for other options in the fall.¹¹

Transportation-related financial problems are behind the closure of Mundare Community Charter School, a rural school in a small community northeast of Edmonton. Mundare will be “winding down” its operation after only one year. Education Minister Mar has suggested that students at the school be absorbed into the local school board. This most recent closure will leave the province with nine operating charters, down from 11.¹²

According to the chairman of the board at Foundations for the Future (another Calgary-based charter school), problems at charter schools may arise because “some board members, competent enough in their own fields, fail to limit their roles to leading and setting policy. They sometimes interfere

in the day-to-day operation of the school, which leads to conflicts with administrators The tendency is for board members to skip past school administrators when presented with problems and to deal directly with parents and teachers This puts them in an awkward spot later when making decisions on issues that they helped to create.”¹³

interest of students and parents, and favours meeting the needs of the labour market over the goals of creating a more equal and just society, and educating citizens to participate in democratic life.”¹⁶ The project’s preliminary findings, presented at the 1998 Learned Societies conference in Ottawa, confirm some of the difficulties charters are having with governance (heavy time

For individual families and schools, choice is a complex process embedded in an unequal society where people choose differently, do not have the same opportunities to choose, and in the poorest cases, have few real choices at all. While some students are fortunate to enter the school of their choice, the educational market is not an equal playing field.

Calgary Board of Education vice-chair Diane Danielson observed that “the difficulties show that Alberta Education will have its hands full providing enough resources to the amateur boards to prevent charters from unravelling.”¹⁴ It appears the problems have been serious enough to prompt charter specialists with the government to publicly suggest that “it might be easier for the Education Department to keep tabs on the schools if they were absorbed back into their surrounding public school district.”¹⁵ Other provinces monitoring Alberta’s experiment with school choice, including New Brunswick where a parent advisory council in Saint John is asking the provincial government to consider charter legislation, should take notice.

Research reveals tensions

Dr. Lynn Bosetti, Principal Investigator with the Donner Foundation-funded Canadian Charter School Project, is currently studying the concept of school choice in Alberta, focusing on the province’s charter schools. Charters are situated within the Klein government’s agenda for education reform which, according to Bosetti, clearly “privileges the economic goals of education, serves the self-

commitment for board members, particularly parents; parents’ lack of knowledge and expertise; vaguely defined roles between administrators and board members). Other areas of concern include tension between parental involvement and teachers’ freedom to pursue innovations in the classroom, and a clash between the corporate and teaching cultures. A final report on this two-year study is expected in September 1999.

Based on the research evidence on school choice initiatives, Dehli concludes that “educational markets do not lead to innovation or to better schools. While some students are fortunate to enter the school of their choice, the educational market is not an equal playing field. For individual families and schools, choice is a complex process embedded in an unequal society where people choose differently, do not have the same opportunities to choose, and in the poorest cases, have few real choices at all.”¹⁷ The suggestion that research and analysis must inform decision-making on educational policy should not be merely wishful thinking. There is clearly much we can, and should, learn from the international experience with school choice. ■

1 Benjamin Levin, "An Epidemic of Education Policy: (What) Can We Learn From Each Other?" (on-line). Available: <http://www.msos.uwstout.edu/~billh/epidemic.txt>

2 *Ibid.*

3 Kari Dehli, "Shopping for schools: The future of education in Ontario?", *Orbit* 29:1 (1998), p. 30.

4 Canadian Teachers' Federation, *Behind the Charter School Myths* (Ottawa, ON: Author, September 1997), p. 3.

5 Excerpted from Canadian Teachers' Federation, *Behind the Charter School Myths*, pp. 3-4.

6 Michael Winerip, "Schools for sale," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 June 1998, p. 44.

7 Much of the foregoing is drawn from the following sources:

Canadian Teachers' Federation, *Behind the Charter School Myths* (Ottawa, ON: Author, September 1997), 47 pages.

Kari Dehli, "Shopping for schools: The future of education in Ontario?", *Orbit* 29:1 (1998), pp. 29-33.

Benjamin Levin, "Will school choice make a difference?", *Canadian School Executive* 16:7 (January 1997), pp. 18-21.

8 Kari Dehli, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

9 Heather-jane Robertson, *No More Teachers, No More Books: The Commercialization of Canada's Schools* (Toronto: ON, McClelland & Stewart, 1998), p. 257.

10 Kari Dehli, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

11 Alanna Mitchell, "Alberta shuts flagship charter school," *Globe and Mail*, 23 May 1998, pp. A1, A7; on the Global Learning Academy, see also Robert Sheppard, "A school failure," *Macleans*, 6 July 1998, pp. 52-53.

12 Graham Thomson, "Busing deficit closing charter school," *Edmonton Journal*, 23 June 1998.

13 Les Sillars, "Taking water but still afloat," *Western Report* 13:2, 9 February 1998, p. 34.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

15 Kevin Steel, "Alberta Education giveth....," *Western Report* 13:5, 2 March 1998, p. 33.

16 Lynn Bosetti, "The Dark Promise of Charter Schools," Paper presented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Ottawa, May 1998, p. 7.

17 Kari Dehli, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Bernie Froese-Germain is a Researcher at the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) in Ottawa. His areas of interest include issues related to the privatization of education, and the social and political aspects of information and communications technology in the schools. He can be reached at CTF, 110 Argyle Ave., Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1B4.

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