

PUBLIC MONEY for PRIVATE SCHOOLS?

Revisiting an Old Debate

PAUL AXELROD

To what extent, if at all, should private or independent schools be supported by public funding? For decades, this subject has inspired heated debate and a patchwork of policy responses throughout Canada. Some provinces, like Ontario, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, provide little or no direct support to independent schools. Others – Quebec and Alberta – sustain these schools with extensive financial subsidies, while a third category – including British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan – occupy a middle ground. The evolution of these varied and complex approaches can only be fully understood by patient students of Canadian educational history.

Current debates on this issue focus on the appropriate role of the state in the governance and regulation of schooling, with proponents on the ideological right and left reaching very different conclusions. Advocates of public funding for private schools deplore the state monopoly over education. Competition on a level playing field between the public and private sectors would, from this perspective, improve the quality and accountability of public schooling, which allegedly fails to meet the diverse and legitimate educational aspirations of many families and communities. Opponents of state aid to independent schools believe that equity, integration and social cohesion can only be achieved through public education and that private schooling generally serves the interests of the privileged or of those with overly narrow, sectarian educational agendas.

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But these arguments become murkier and less ideologically straightforward when the themes of cultural diversity and human rights are considered. Indeed, one writer builds his case for state support of private schooling on a human rights platform.¹ Historically, he notes, denominational communities, primarily Protestant and Catholic, pioneered the development of formal education in Canada before Confederation, and in several provinces the schools which they created were subsequently protected and funded by government. The law enshrined these practices, which can now be altered only through constitutional amendment. “Fair treatment”, in the form of direct public subsidization, is thus accorded those religious minorities whose schools have deep historical roots in Canada and denied those whose populations have established educational facilities more recently. This seems especially paradoxical in a country known for its official endorsement of the principles and practices of multiculturalism. As the Canadian population diversifies further, the paradox will become even starker.

The public policy dilemma is most clearly evident in Ontario, triggered recently by the opposing actions of two successive governments. In 2001 the Conservatives offered tax credits to families sending their children to independent schools, only to see this policy reversed by the Liberal government following its election in 2003. Thus a long-standing political predicament remains: a Catholic separate school system, securely situated within the public sector, is fully funded, while the schools run by other religious denominations outside the public system are denied such support. Is there a solution to this conundrum?

The way forward may well be found in documents from the past. Following the extension of full funding to Catholic separate schools in 1985, the Ontario government commissioned Bernard J. Shapiro, then Dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, to assess the role, governance, and possible funding arrangements of private schools in the province.

Backed by specialized commissioned studies, public hearings, and more than 500 written briefs, the report thoroughly explored its subject’s terrain. It reviewed the

EN BREF Faut-il ou non subventionner les écoles privées? Il s’agit d’un vieux dilemme au Canada. Un rapport de Bernard Shapiro, préparé il y a 20 ans à la demande du gouvernement de l’Ontario suite à sa décision d’accorder le plein financement aux écoles séparées catholiques, proposait une possibilité de solution. En effet, il recommandait que l’on subventionne les écoles privées qui étaient prêtes à respecter des normes d’imputabilité et à adopter des valeurs démocratiques fondamentales. L’auteur estimait qu’une telle mesure aiderait à renforcer le système d’éducation publique, encouragerait la diversité culturelle et éducationnelle, résoudrait la question épique de l’importance relative à accorder dans la politique d’éducation aux droits de la personne par rapport à ceux des minorités et protégerait les fonds publics.

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history of private schooling in Ontario and the status of these schools in every Canadian province and several western countries, observing that “the general, but not universal trend, is for increased government control to be associated with increased levels of public funding for private schools.”² This was followed by a painstaking appraisal of arguments for and against government support of independent schools. The report concluded with a detailed articulation of the commissioner’s recommendations and the principles that informed them.

The author was favourably disposed to the claim by independent school educators that in a multicultural society, parents should have the right to select, “free from financial considerations, the kind of education they believe to be appropriate to their children.” He also sympathized with the concern that public funding of Catholic schools harmed the rights of religious minorities denied such support. He noted that the constitutional arguments for government financing of Catholic schools had deep roots in Canadian history, but “they do nothing to inform us about what we ought to do” with respect to other religious schools. However, he rejected the “double taxation” argument, that is, that parents who sent their children to independent schools had to pay for education twice – once for public schools through their taxes and once through private school tuition fees. Citizens, he contended, did not have the right to opt out of paying for public services that supported the common good on the grounds that they chose not to use those services, and public education, unquestionably, was an indispensable social good. He noted, too, that private schools currently received indirect public support through various tax exemptions owing to their status as non-profit educational institutions and/or religious organizations.

He subjected arguments against public funding of private schools to similar scrutiny. He disputed the claim that the province could not afford to fund independent schools. Such costs would be a relatively small proportion of the overall provincial budget. He agreed with the contention that public schools were a critical instrument of integration and social cohesion in a culturally diverse society, though he noted that not every public school performed this role effectively, and that social divisions within these schools were not unknown. Government policy should avoid weakening public education and exacerbating community tensions. Shapiro wrote that “In reviewing the various arguments and my own response to them...the emerging difficulty was how to envision the schooling arrangements for Ontario that would increase parental choice and address discrimination while not only maintaining but also enhancing – in the name of social cohesion, tolerance, and the quality of educational opportunity – the integrity



of Ontario's public schools."

He concluded that a strong, flexible public system in a tolerant, diverse community could accommodate government support for independent schools. The level of that support, however, need not be equivalent to that of the public system since the latter has broader social purposes. Furthermore, independent schools receiving government funds should be subjected to a reasonable degree of administrative oversight. They should employ only certified teachers, charge no tuition, be accountable to local school boards, and have non-discriminatory admission policies, though students would follow the prescribed programme of the independent school.

Shapiro would also have required all schools (public and private) receiving state funding to provide first language instruction in English or French; to include "learning experiences" in the arts, Canadian and world studies, language, mathematics, physical education and science; to avoid promoting "racial or ethnic superiority, religious intolerance and other values inconsistent with a democratic society"; to enable students to develop "critical thinking skills in both the intellectual and moral spheres"; and to provide students with "access to alternative points of view of their areas of study." In his view, these prerequisites represented core values that publicly funded education ought to embrace. Private schools prepared to accept such prescriptions would be deemed "associated independent schools," and would receive operating but not necessarily capital funding from the province. Those independent schools unwilling to follow these practices would receive no finan-

cial support from government. The report predicted that this program would cost the province a non-prohibitive \$51,000,000 annually.

Shapiro, therefore, had produced a report that promised simultaneously to strengthen public schooling, cultivate educational and cultural diversity, resolve the human and minority rights conundrum in current policy, and protect the public purse. Notwithstanding its thoroughness and creativity, Shapiro's study was shelved by the provincial government and has gathered dust ever since. Perhaps it is time for educators and politicians in Ontario – and elsewhere in Canada – to give it a second look. ★

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Notes

- 1 Romulo Magsino, "Fair Treatment and Private Schools in Various Provinces," in Lance W. Roberts and Rodney A. Clifton, eds., *Crosscurrents: Contemporary Canadian Educational Issues* (Toronto: Nelson 1995)
- 2 This and subsequent quotations are taken from Bernard J. Shapiro, *The Report of the Commission on Private Schools in Ontario* (Toronto: Government of Ontario, 1985), or Bernard J. Shapiro, "The Public Funding of Private Schools in Ontario: The Setting, Some Arguments, and Some Matters of Belief," *Canadian Journal of Education* 11, no. 3 (1986): 264-77

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