

Longitudinal data show that scores from the Canadian Tests of Basic Skills declined significantly during that period. Worse, it was not educational bureaucrats who pointed out the bad news. That was left to an outsider, the Economic Council of Canada (Economic Council of Canada, 1992). More recently, results from the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMISS) and the Canadian School Achievement Indicators Project (SAIP) confirm only mediocre results for Atlantic Canada.

There are other anomalies. For example, because of demographic shifts, the number of Canadian school children has declined significantly in recent years. Spending, however, has not decreased at all. In fact, it has continued to rise and is now some 20 percent higher than before. To put this spending issue in stark relief, consider the following example. Recent analysis of data showed that "Quebec needs 5,000 bureaucrats to oversee the education of one million students while Denmark needs only 50 administrators for the same number of students" (*The Globe and Mail*, 26 February 1993). No wonder policy makers and legislators no longer trust that the system can or will fix itself.

And their distrust is justified. In the U.S., there have been several "waves" of educational reform over the last few decades, all variously copied in Canada. Whole systems have lurched into a series of top-down reforms that were largely based on unproven methodology and that were invariably costly. These reforms took a tremendous amount of effort and attention, but no sustained improvement in student outcomes resulted. In Edmonton, for example, the public system's site-based management "revolution" did not result in outcomes that are noticeably better than those at other schools in the province. The reason? Such reforms go only a little way towards what would really make a difference - complete school-site autonomy and real accountability - i.e. real consequences for poor performance.

Scholars and policy analysts have finally begun to zero in on the problem. There has been a revolution in our understanding of the structure and management practices that make organizations successful. The lessons have now been widely adopted by modern business and in the provision of some public services by some governments. Until now, public education in Atlantic Canada and the rest of North America has largely escaped.

Successful organizations are now adopting "tight-loose configurations," tight in that mission and expected outcomes are tightly defined, loose in that those providing the services are given greater freedom to manage their work environment, deal with clients, and solve problems at the work site. This leads to "flat" management structures, the exact opposite of many huge multi-layered school bureaucracies. Lawton covers this ground very carefully in *Busting Bureaucracy*. In his discussion, he notes that Osborne and Gaebler sum up the ideas superbly in their landmark book, *Reinventing Government*:

They argue government should be competitive, mission driven, results-oriented, customer-driven and decentralized, emphasizing participation and teamwork rather than hierarchy (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Their quote from Savas says it all:

The job of government is to steer; not to row the boat. Delivering services is rowing, and government is not very good at rowing (cited in Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Now, for the first time, there is a split in the ranks of educators. Many are now willing to concede that the system is not working. Recently, for example, principals and vice-principals in British Columbia were asked about how their effectiveness might be improved. Among the main responses were desire for a reduction in Ministry initiatives and greater school-level control in hiring and budgeting. As well, teacher contracts were seen as a problem, hampering "the free choice of staff" and "inhibiting the ability to build a team or develop a common mission in the school" (Bognar and Associates Social Research, 1997). The report failed to note that charter schools are designed to provide just such relief.

It is for reasons such as these that many thoughtful educators are now willing to try new ways of conducting public education. That means they are open to limited deregulation and the basic bargain of charter schools. In Canada, for example, many teachers in British Columbia belong to an alternative teachers' organization, Teachers for Excellence in Education, which fully supports chartering, choices for parents and teachers, and strong public accountability by the teaching profession. In the U.S., the Association of American Educators and many large state teachers' organizations have adopted precisely the same position.

By contrast, mainstream Canadian teachers unions are hostile and quite closed to chartering. The concept is derided as an elitist scheme to gain private schooling at the expense of the poor and underprivileged. The claim is made that funds will be diverted from public education which will be weakened as a result. Amusingly, those are the same claims made earlier by the two large teachers' unions in the U.S., The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Both unions have now completely reversed their earlier positions. In fact, the NEA has already announced plans to assist its teacher members in six states to form charter schools. The aim? To learn how chartering might benefit public education and the professional lives of teachers. Such sweet reason no doubt arose from awareness by the NEA that the charter idea was extremely logical and promising for teachers, that it was inevitable, and that much of its membership was already interested in and many supportive of the concept. In Canada, it is only a matter of time until the Canadian Teachers' Federation and the various provincial federations reverse themselves and come on board.

Benefits For Parents and Teachers

THERE HAS been a quiet revolution in educational research over the last decade. For example, scholars now have a fairly mature understanding of the characteristics that make schools effective. Together, they are known as the *effective schools correlates*. When researchers examine exceptionally effective schools, they invariably find these correlates implemented at a high level. Nevertheless, deliberately setting out to create highly effective schools by implementing the effectiveness correlates has proven disappointing. The problem is that two further conditions are necessary to create such schools. They are complete autonomy balanced by full accountability. And these, of course, are precisely the conditions granted to charter schools.

In the public domain, with children assigned to school by zone, teachers assembled randomly by a distant board, and principals routinely shuffled about for administrative convenience, it is difficult to obtain a strong consensus on just about anything at the school site. Parents disagree about expectations, discipline, the level of "academic press," assessment, and even the purpose of schooling: i.e., instruction versus discovery and play. The very same is true for teachers. They and their principals have widely varying philosophies and expectations, and many have strong preferences with regard to teaching methods and materials.

When the above mix is blended with societal confusion about what we expect from our public schools, it is clear why all too many of them are ineffective. The very thing that could make them work - strong consensus and implementation of the effectiveness correlates - is missing or extremely difficult to achieve. The result? Existing public schools often end up subscribing to the lowest common denominator of expectations, values, and practices. Mediocre outcomes invariably follow.

But charter schools are schools of choice for both parents and teachers. This allows strong differentiation among schools and their staffs. Parents and teachers should be allowed to find their way to the schools with whose expectations and methods they agree.

Strong consensus through choice is the advantage that private schools have had for years. Why can't public schools enjoy that advantage, too? Neither teachers nor parents will choose charter schools that consistently do poorly. Over time, the choices that are made will be made in favor of practices and schools that work. Obviously, that will be good. Critics argue that only affluent or able parents will make such choices. That would be bad. However, such an argument greatly underestimates the desire of many poor and disadvantaged parents to do the best for their children. As well, experience in the U.S. has already shown that a proportionately greater percentage of such parents have made charter choices for their children.

And what about those parents and teachers who don't make such a choice initially? Well, over time, they and the entire schooling community will become aware of the more pleasant atmosphere and superior outcomes that result when a school becomes highly effective. Shouldn't they get a chance to see that firsthand so they can later be convinced to give themselves and their children to such a school? Shouldn't we all? This is why charter schools can help reform the entire public education system. We all need to see just how good schools can become over time when everyone at the school agrees on the crucial basics and gives themselves to a school that works.

New Brunswick's Parent Councils Are Not Enough

IN ALMOST every province in Canada, there is now a headlong rush to pass legislation enabling a new breed of "souped up" PTA (parent-teacher association) to be created at public schools. These new parent councils (PCs) have already been the subject of legislation in Alberta, and Atlantic Canada is about to follow. New Brunswick has pointedly announced that such councils (and not charter schools) will be a cornerstone of its ongoing public school reform initiative.

Here we go again. As everyone who has a keen interest in public education knows, Canadian education officials have implemented an embarrassing series of fads over the years. The common features are that they usually originate south of the border, are not supported by large-scale research studies, and are implemented system-wide rather than piloted first to see if they work. There are two other features. They do not work, and no one is ever held accountable for their implementation (in fact, the prophets are often rapidly promoted before their handiwork fails to pan out).

Since this new beast is already in competition with charter schools for time, attention, and legitimacy, some clear thinking about school councils is in order. That there is even need of these new PCs is clear confirmation that school boards and our usual method of governing

public schools have not been working. Parents were right to complain that they had been marginalized at their own schools and that the various PTAs were essentially useless, relegated to peddling brownies and helping with outings.

School councils are being promoted as a method of meaningfully involving parents in their children's education. While it is true that there is a strong correlation between parental involvement and children's school success, there is absolutely no evidence that intense involvement with a school council is any better than simply being a good parent at home by ensuring that children do their homework, read, get to bed on time, watch only moderate amounts of television, and observe a policy of appropriate and consistent behavioral limits. Besides, most parents are not interested or are too busy to participate in such a council. That means that a small group of parents may gain undue influence at the school. There is obvious potential for highly disruptive conflict with other parents, teaching staff, and the principal. Highly charged precedents have already occurred in both Britain and Canada.

The legislation still leaves no doubt that ultimate authority resides with the principal. Starry-eyed parents who think they can influence major changes to the school matters that count (pedagogical approach, teaching materials, assessment procedures, and selection of principal and staff) had better think again. Besides, in practice, most principals are more than up to taking over the leadership of such councils or co-opting otherwise well-meaning but outmatched parents.

In New Brunswick, the first rumblings of awareness that little has changed are now being heard. Members of the new parent councils are now realizing that parental input on the important matters affecting school performance (see above) may be up for discussion but real decision-making remains with appointed administrators just as before. Educational leaders know this full well. Compared to real alternative models, charter schools and parental choice, they don't fear parent councils at all, knowing that they do not really change the balance of power at schools. Compare that to their strident criticism of a small number of charter schools that happen to bypass them completely. Legislators should pay attention to this signal. Their new PCs are going to prove very disappointing as a vehicle for reform. This writer thinks legislators have been conned and are once again backing the wrong horse.

The key issue, again, is that of consensus. School councils will suffer an inability to develop high-level consensus on any matters of importance. This Achilles heel of school councils is common to any type of consensus-building approach to public education. Choice by charter offers a clear and powerful mechanism for gaining and keeping that kind of consensus, effortlessly, each and every time. Is it not apparent that we can have too much democracy? In the rush to democratize schools with PCs, that is just what is happening. By comparison, consider what happens at a top-flight private school. If parents choose such a school for its clear focus, high expectations, and strong pedagogical approach, would they wish to see other parents suddenly meddling with the school's management? Absolutely not! That is precisely what they would *not* wish to see.

It should be pointed out that charter schools have school councils, too. However, there is a critical difference. Patterned after the board of governors at a private school, these councils already enjoy strong agreement on general school principles and expectations. Why? Because they are there by choice and fully committed as a result. There is another difference as well. Governing councils at charter schools have full legal rights and the duty to act on educational matters that count. I put it to legislators in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere: As a parent, which would you prefer? A public school with one of your new school councils but with pedagogy

and expectations with which you disagreed, or a charter school with a council that you know is composed of like-minded parents and teachers and that has pedagogy and expectations with which you agree? This writer's choice would be for the latter every time. No contest! I suspect most thoughtful parents would agree.

The Experience with Chartering. It Works!

TO PUT this section in perspective, it should first be noted that equally fair-minded nations such as Holland, Denmark, and Japan already provide *full public funding for private schools*.

Charter schools, of course, are public schools, so, NO, this is not radical stuff. In fact, Atlantic Canada is actually a latecomer to this issue. A number of western democracies have already passed legislation allowing for the formation of thousands of charter schools. In Britain, for example, there are now over 1,100 grant-maintained schools and over 20 percent of British high school students attend them. State legislators in the United States are not likely to be different kinds of people than their Atlantic Canadian counterparts. Already, however, those legislators have passed bill after bill allowing for charter schools in their states. The number of such states has now reached twenty-six and over 490 schools are now up and running. Many of the states are already revisiting their original charter laws and fine-tuning or liberalizing them.

And then there is New Zealand, which has chartered every public school in the country. Now that is dramatic! Yet the sky hasn't fallen, children are still receiving public education, and many New Zealanders would never consider a return to the old school board system. Finally, there is only one province in Canada that has drafted a charter law. Alberta led off in 1995. As this is written, Canada now has eight charter schools up and running. As elsewhere, these schools have been heavily oversubscribed, and teachers in them are extremely pleased with their new options.

And what has been the experience? First of all, the disasters predicted by the critics have not happened. In the U.S., most of the charter schools that have opened have been oversubscribed, often heavily, by both parents and teachers. By and large, satisfaction levels of the parents, students, and teachers at these schools have been substantially higher than that at their previous public schools. Educational results have been more than satisfactory, charter schools often obtaining very good outcomes on state assessments or standardized tests. A finding that is particularly confounding to critics is that many home schooling or privately schooling parents have been lured back to public education as a result of charter schools. Only a few schools have lost their charters, usually for financial mismanagement. Several have had warnings for inadequate management and have had to obtain assistance in handling their affairs.