

And what about school board and teachers' union response? Well, the response of most school boards is still generally hostile. There are exceptions, however. Some school boards have actually been quite helpful, determined to assist and learn from these new schools. Some have even joined in and initiated charter schools themselves. *Second order effects* (or spin-off effects) are responses that the existing system makes in response to a charter law that it had not or would not have made with out such legislation. It did not take long for a classic second-order effect to occur in Alberta. Requests for a traditional-model school by parents in Edmonton had been repeatedly brushed aside until the charter law was passed. Then, suddenly, not one but two traditional-model schools were approved by the very same board that earlier had been absolutely intransigent on the issue. And beyond that, Edmonton Public Schools has chosen to further preempt the charter movement by acceding to parental wishes and opening the Logos Christian School. Such a decision by this or any other Alberta board would have been unthinkable before charter legislation forced them to watch over their shoulders for their competition.

And what about the concerns over possible elitism? Well, the early research studies on charter schools in the U.S. are very reassuring. *Charter Schools in Action: What Have We Learned?* is a study in progress published by the Hudson Institute. Its initial findings are typical. Up to half of charter operators indicate their schools are for children "at risk." About 40 percent of students enrolled are minority youngsters, more than in the general school population. Most significantly, privileged Caucasian children are *not* enrolled in greater numbers (Finn, Bierlein and Manno, 1996).¹

There are other reassuring findings. The educational programs are turning out to be reasonable, often conservative in nature, not "off-the-wall" experiments as some critics feared. By far, most of the teachers who have applied for charter positions have been certified, even if that was not required. Many are willing to accept somewhat lower wages to allow their schools to succeed during the difficult startup period. Despite that, there has been no shortage of excellent teachers applying for positions. As one teacher quoted in the study notes, "For an educator, it's like you died and went to heaven. We are creating as we go" (Finn, Bierlein and Manno, 1996). Significantly, most wish to have no involvement with teachers' unions.

One of the most striking findings has been the remarkable commitment and participation by parents. In an age when public schools are begging for parental involvement, this may be one of the most beneficial outcomes of charterlog. When parents are allowed to choose their schools, they get involved!

Another experience is significant, this time from New Zealand. While that country has chartered all its schools, only about 30 percent of the funding of each school is under its own control. The rest, largely determined by the number of teachers and their salaries, is under state control. Teachers' unions had fought tenaciously to prevent the original intent of the national government to grant "bulk funding" (in which 100 percent of the funds would flow directly to schools). In 1992, however, the government did run a trial of bulk funding in sixty-nine schools. The trial was independently evaluated by researchers from Massey University. The results speak for themselves. Fully 70 - 90 percent of the principals and trustees believed learning opportunities had been enhanced, that learning outcomes had improved, and that the effectiveness and efficiency of their schools had improved. Not one of the schools wished to return to the old method of state control.

It is not surprising that New Zealand recently announced plans to allow all schools to opt for

bulk funding in the future.

The same is true in Britain. In the words of the R. Hon. Gillian Shephard, Britain's Secretary of State for Education, "We want to see the benefits of self-government extended to *all* state schools."

It Can Happen in Atlantic Canada

FACING GLOBALIZATION and intense international economic competition, governments across North America and around the world are closely examining the performance and outcomes of their school systems. Most find serious shortcomings, often due in part to the very nature of those systems. Many have come to the conclusion that some form of deregulation will be necessary to stimulate the major improvements needed in their schools. In short, they no longer trust that the system can or will fix itself.

That is where charter schools come in. Many educators, policy analysts, and legislators have come to understand and appreciate the advantages offered by the charter school idea, a limited and safe form of school deregulation and competition. Atlantic Canadians have quite an advantage. They do not have to be first and can carefully inspect the legislation and experience of others. There is now a wide array of evidence that charter schools cost little if any extra, perform at higher levels, satisfy parents and teachers at a high level, and result in the kind of parental involvement that many educators would die for. Best of all, there is ample evidence that non-charter public schools respond rapidly and that they, too, improve as they begin to compete with charter schools for students and to copy their most successful strategies. Everywhere the experience has been the same, i.e., within a short time, the existing public system pays charter schools the greatest compliment possible: imitation.

For legislators, this is easy to do. Provision for a small number of schools is all that is required (ten or fifteen per Atlantic province would do). There is no need to spend money, create bureaucracies or manage a whole new department. Legislators need only create the public schooling conditions that must be satisfied, ensure that outcomes will be monitored closely, and then let their educators and parents go. They will provide the "sweat equity" and do their utmost to ensure that their school is successful, providing the outcomes that both they and those thoughtful legislators wish to see.

Atlantic Canada has the advantage of being able to pick and choose from what has worked best in other jurisdictions and can fine tune the provisions to suit the region's unique social conditions. Moreover, chartering can now be readily justified from the successful experiences of thousands of charter schools now up and running in Britain, New Zealand and the United States. Atlantic Canada's nearest international market and competing region, New England, has already seen the establishment of a numerous charter schools. Virtually all New England states now have charter legislation or have such legislation pending. Educators, policy officials, parents and legislators in these jurisdictions were able to mount successful efforts to establish charter schools. Surely Atlantic Canadians, with no less drive, imagination and concern for their children than parents elsewhere, can also successfully mobilize to gain the best for students in this region.

And It Must Happen in Atlantic Canada

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT in Atlantic Canada already lags behind that of other regions in Canada. It would be unfair to Atlantic Canada's youth to allow the region's

education systems to fall further behind, under the control of a large slow-moving bureaucracy in a fast changing world. In fact, there are very strong pedagogical and policy reasons to encourage chartering to rapidly improve student outcomes.

Consider the example of early reading and print instruction. For years, Atlantic Canadian educators (and their colleagues across the nation) have failed to optimize their pedagogical approach despite torrents of research showing that excessive whole language influence hindered reading and print acquisition for many youngsters, particularly the disadvantaged. For years, reformers familiar with the emerging research findings have tried to have these findings incorporated in early reading programs. However, they have not been able to overcome the education system's inert and rather blind devotion to a pedagogical approach that has little scientific basis.

Imagine, however, what would happen if charter schools were free to rapidly implement proper scientifically based reading programs and compete for results against the current programs. With such freedom, dramatic reading results such as those achieved by disadvantaged youngsters in Barbara Foorman's recently released University of Houston study (*The Globe and Mail*, 18 February 1997) would not take a decade (if ever) to reach Atlantic Canada classrooms. With charter freedoms and an emphasis on results, some schools would be up and running with Open Court and phonemic awareness screening overnight. And as the results came in within the year, the heat would be on the system to do as well. After all, allowing a competition of ideas works for building cars and computers, improving medical outcomes and for distributing a host of improved goods and services. Why wouldn't such a competitive stimulus be good for reading instruction? For math instruction?

Atlantic Canada's legislators should be reminded about the history of educational reform in North America. Despite legislation mandating numerous reforms and the spending of boatloads of money, control remains in the hands of educational special interest groups and achievement is little improved. The reality is that senior bureaucrats are simply not primarily interested in improving student outcomes or satisfying parents. And the way the system is governed, that is not going to change. Provider capture by the bureaucrats running the system will still be in effect despite the best efforts of legislators unless they have to compete with schools that are outside their control. Hence charter schools.

For real reform, legislators will have to add a new element. They will have to create what amounts to a new playing field and provide opportunities for teachers and schools to escape the gridlock. Real educational reform will only come when the finest and most committed educators are given the freedom to drive educational reform. The system needs space for talented teachers to show the art of the possible when they are given their heads and held fully accountable in return. In short, Atlantic Canada needs to add charter schools to the reform equation. There is nothing that will shake up the system and the power of teachers' unions more than independent public schools. With a strong charter law and without spending a single additional penny on education, the Atlantic provincial governments can instantly encourage a new level of responsiveness by educators and school officials. As well, at a stroke, it can liberate hundreds or even thousands of the finest educational insiders and change agents to undertake reform from within the system.

Doing Better

ATLANTIC CANADA can do better than Alberta, which passed fairly weak charter legislation. To create a real, live charter law in the Atlantic provinces, the following

provisions should be included:

- there should be no cap or a large cap on the number of charter schools permitted. Chartering is about stimulating reform, and there have to be enough to make a difference. Alberta's cap of fifteen charters is too low;
- there should be provision for conversion of existing public schools to charter status, subject to a ballot showing clear desire for conversion by the school's parents and staff. Alberta has no such provision. Britain and California both do, and large numbers of conversions have resulted;
- the list of potential sponsors should include colleges, universities, teachers' unions and even private organizations. After all, the legislation will ensure that schools meet public school principles. Alberta did not take this important step;
- there should be a provision to ensure that so-called boutique schools do not gain the lion's share of the charters available. These special niche schools are of interest only to small numbers of special kinds of students (e.g., disaffected teenagers, the handicapped, etc.). They have their place in chartering, but the existing system is already creating alternatives to satisfy their needs. Boutique schools do not press the existing system to reform itself. Schools for large numbers of "the severely normal" will do that. Too many of Alberta's charters have gone to boutique schools;
- there should be provision for a percentage of non-certified teachers, especially strong subject specialists. This is a key dynamic for educational reform. Principals and charter boards will not risk hiring such personnel unless they are extremely capable. It is educational achievement by students that is the key objective of school reform, not union sensibilities. Alberta neglected this dynamic;
- research model charters should be provided for. Such schools, operated on a request-for-proposal basis and created by conversion of existing schools, should be encouraged as research projects. That would allow groups of teachers, research groups, or other charter operators to show what they can do when they get consensus, invoke new or refined pedagogy, and aim for much higher outcomes under autonomous conditions. The legislation should allow for partnership support by foundations, firms, and government, as well as for measurement of the results by scholars. This is a wonderful opportunity to test pedagogical reforms and disseminate the results of those that work. Alberta neglected this opportunity.

There are two other important considerations. Many supporters of the charter concept will want religious charter schools. While this is not possible in the U.S. because it violates the U.S. constitution, the issue is potentially problematic in Canada. This writer agrees with most observers who believe that charter schools should not be religious (at least at the beginning). The apparent exclusiveness of such schools greatly strengthens the hand of critics and might prevent charter legislation altogether. Over time, as experience with chartering builds and the enormous advantage of strong consensus at the school site becomes apparent, it would not be inappropriate to revisit the issue, perhaps by testing some pilot schools to assess their effect on the community. Chartering is far too important for education reform in Canada to risk it from the beginning by insisting on religious charter schools.

Secondly, the Atlantic provincial governments and Ministers of Education have the ability to frame charter legislation in terms of the professional opportunity being opened for the teaching profession. And that is precisely what it will be. Teachers will have the opportunity to open their own fully funded public schools. Alberta neglected to do this, and most of the charter activity so far has been undertaken by parents. This slows the whole process down. In Atlantic Canada, such encouragement from the legislature would reverse the negative union view of chartering that too many teachers have adopted. If chartering were presented as something they could do for themselves, instead of having it done to them, teachers would be encouraged to examine the wonderful professional possibilities. That would force immediate rethinking of the issue by the teachers' federations.

Conclusion

EDUCATIONAL SPECIAL interest groups, especially teachers' unions, have succeeded so far in creating a storm of suspicion and criticism about the charter idea. These Critics purposely charge that chartering is something promoted by the rich and able in society for their own advantage. In fact, the affluent have long had access to private schools or have been able to purchase real estate to enroll their children in better public schools. They have also had the means and ability to ensure that their children accessed the public system's better programs. They do not need charter schools. The poor and the disadvantaged, however, have never had such choices. It is they and their children in poor schools and programs who need charter schools. Teachers need them, too, especially gifted but frustrated teachers and those who are losing heart with the system. Finally, parents need charter schools, especially those who see public education as a noble concept in danger of collapse.

Critics have carefully tried to frame the issue in partisan terms, claiming that the charter idea is one promoted by right-wing zealots and market enthusiasts who are determined to destroy public education. *Chartering is not a partisan issue.* In New Zealand, it was a Labour government that introduced the concept. In Britain, the Labour party has backed off its initial shrill response and now quickly acknowledges that grant maintained schools have some merit. It helps that the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition has sent his own son to such a school. In the U.S., charter laws have been passed by both Republican and Democrat state legislatures. President Clinton is now a keen supporter of charter legislation. His government recently announced its intent to provide millions of dollars to stimulate the formation of some 3,000 charter schools by the year 2000. In Alberta, charter legislation was introduced by a Minister of Education who was a former teacher, principal, union official, and president of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Finally, it should be noted that just south of the border, America's largest teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have both endorsed the idea of chartering.

Charter schooling in Atlantic Canada will be about reforming the system. Atlantic Canada's public education system has gone wrong and needs fixing. Entrusting the repairs to those who let it happen makes little sense, especially when their solution involves more of the same and spending further funds that citizens in the Atlantic provinces do not have. The real issue is creating effective schools and implementing effective instruction for children. Chartering addresses that issue and only sounds radical because the central concerns up to now have been about spending money, furthering ideology, and hoarding power. Charter schooling completely undercuts that agenda, hence the fierce criticism by the system's defenders. Atlantic Canada's provincial legislators have already shown courage and determination in reforming other public services. Now is the time for them to do the same for public education and embrace the charter school idea. It simply makes sense.

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