



Policy



Paper

# **An Untapped Potential for Educational Diversity**

**POLICY LESSONS FROM ALBERTA CHARTER SCHOOLS**

**By Paige T. MacPherson**

*Halifax, Nova Scotia,*

*August 2018*







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# An Untapped Potential for Educational Diversity

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By Paige T. Macpherson

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## Executive Summary

Charter schools could bring great benefit to Atlantic Canada. A review of research on charter schools and the provincial education systems in Eastern Canada shows that such schools offer great potential to widen educational options to students of all income levels, and may be exceptionally valuable for engaging disadvantaged students in classroom learning. Paradoxically, charter school reform in the region could not be introduced without some political resistance.

Charter schools are an innovative model of public education. They function as autonomous, government-funded, non-profit schools that charge no tuition, each offering a unique educational approach. Charter schools represent a significant opportunity for Canadian provinces looking to increase educational diversity for all students, at a low cost to government, with impressive results. Charter schools have been operating successfully in Alberta for over 20 years. Yet, despite its success, the Alberta model has not expanded to the rest of Canada.

Introducing charter schools could be particularly advantageous in Atlantic Canada because the provincial education systems lack choice for parents and students, and governments are facing serious cost constraints. (The same is true for Ontario).

The Alberta model is worth considering and adopting for many reasons. Chief among them is superior school performance, as well as satisfaction and demand from the public. An analysis of provincial data shows charter school enrolment is growing relative to total school-age population in Alberta, and anecdotal evidence shows strong parental demand. An analysis of grades 6 and 9 provincial achievement test (PAT) score data shows that Alberta charter schools on average almost always outperform all other types of schools—notably independent schools.

Alberta's successes have not peaked. The province has not reached its maximum number of charter schools. It appears that regulatory and practical barriers have constrained charter school expansion in Alberta.



## Introduction

Charter schools could bring great benefit to Atlantic Canada. A review of existing research on charter schools and the provincial education systems in Eastern Canada shows that these schools offer great potential to widen educational options to students of all income levels, and may be exceptionally valuable for engaging disadvantaged students in classroom learning. Paradoxically, charter school reform in the region could not be introduced without some political resistance.

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Introducing charter schools could be particularly advantageous in Atlantic Canada because the provincial education systems lack choice for parents and students, and governments are facing serious cost constraints. (The same is true for Ontario).

Charter schools are an integral part of Alberta's educational choice framework, offering an alternative form of fully funded public elementary and high school. Several countries, including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom have introduced charter schools in one form or another. In Canada, charter schools are unique to Alberta. Based on Alberta's experience, charter schools would benefit Atlantic Canada, where educational diversity is limited. They would add choice and innovation, potentially improve test scores, foster cost savings, new research, diverse educational approaches, and outreach to disadvantaged students.

Drawing on data showing student enrolment and provincial achievement test (PAT) scores, this report documents Alberta charter schools' success and suggests it would be worth expanding to other provinces. The data analysis does not control for socioeconomic status, but finds charter schools on average outperform all other types of schools, including independent schools that charge tuition. Based on measurable and anecdotal evidence, charter schools are popular and enrolment is growing.

Charter schools are a worthwhile model for other provincial governments seeking increased school diversity. However, this may not come without political and policy challenges. The Alberta experience is not perfect. The availability of charter schools does not seem to meet the demand, yet their number falls below the legislated cap, signalling that there are regulatory and practical barriers to their expansion.



## Alberta Charter Schools: The Basics

Charter schools are autonomous, non-profit, publicly funded schools within Alberta's K-12 public education system. Societies of parents and educators founded these schools and dedicated them to a specific vision of education delivery not offered in traditional public schools. The "charter" for each school is the unique program it is mandated to provide (Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools, 2011). This could be anything from a different educational philosophy to a focus on sports or arts. They cannot be religious schools, and they cannot turn students away if space is available. Only accredited teachers may teach at Alberta charter schools (Province of Alberta, 1999). They cannot be full members of the Alberta Teachers Association (ATA), but can be associate members. Charter schools teach the Alberta curriculum and their students take standardized tests like all Alberta students. The minister of education holds charter schools accountable through regular evaluations, and charter authorities each have a board of directors.

### An Overview of Alberta's Current Charter Schools

Alberta has 23 charter school buildings under the umbrella of 13 charter school authorities. The schools are mostly located in urban Calgary and Edmonton, but two are in smaller cities and another two are in rural areas. These schools vary among offering elementary, middle school, and high school education, and offer a broad spectrum of educational focus areas targeting a diverse range of students. A few focus on academic enrichment or traditional public education with teacher-directed instruction. One encourages parent involvement and character development. One school offers progressive arts programming with self-directed learning and promotes community action. Another teaches inquiry-based learning with an emphasis on women and girls. One charter school targets students for whom English is the second or third language. Another provides supports for students who have experienced mental health struggles, unstable housing, or trauma. One school emphasizes science and technology. Another follows a philosophy of intensive music education. Still another promotes rural community leadership. Another focuses on Indigenous learning.



## Introduction Of Charter Schools In Alberta

Former premier Ralph Klein and former education minister Halvar Jonson, a former ATA president and school principal, introduced charter schools on March 31, 1994, seeking to improve student outcomes through unique, innovative public schools. On May 25, 1994, Bill 19, the *School Amendment Act*, brought charter schools into law. The *Alberta School Act* (Province of Alberta, 2002a) legislated a cap on the number of charter school authorities permitted to operate. Alberta's first charter school opened in the fall of 1995. At the time, education reform was in focus globally and market-driven reforms were at the forefront (Thompson, Kowch, and Gereluk, 2016a). A 1992 Economic Council of Canada report titled *A Lot to Learn* found that Canada's education systems could be improved through reduced interference, increased principal flexibility, the publication of provincial assessments, and increased student choice. In 1993, an Alberta government report titled *Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools* identified a lack of competition in the public system as an impediment to educational excellence (Ritchie, 2010a).





## Criticisms And Controversy

### Private Schools in Public Clothing?

The charter school model isn't popular with every stakeholder. Debates in Alberta's legislature during the introduction of Bill 19 showed a philosophical divide between the governing Progressive Conservatives (PCs) and the opposition Liberals. Some Liberal MLAs were tepid but recognized the potential benefits or the importance of competition in the system.

Teachers' unions tend to be hostile toward charter school policies. Even in Ontario, where charter schools have never existed, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) (2016) has published multiple pieces criticizing them, or rejoicing in the fact that "Canada has been able to mostly resist the charter school movement and voucher systems." In Alberta, the ATA expressed public concerns about its lessening influence, in response to the broad swath of education reforms Klein's government brought in. In 1994, the ATA launched a half-million dollar campaign, which Matsumoto (2012) characterized as being "against cuts to education and attempts by the Tory caucus to erode the teachers' union's control." Many teachers saw the government's reforms as an affront to their profession, and implicit in the introduction was the notion that public schools were not satisfying students and parents (Bruce et al., 1997a). In 1998, the ATA passed a resolution against charter schools, arguing that they were exclusive (though, legally, charter schools cannot exclude students). The ATA even said that charter schools violate human rights legislation, and argued against the fact that the schools' teachers cannot be full union members. The ATA maintains that charter schools divert funds away from traditional public schools (ATA, n.d.a). Though charter schools are technically public schools, non-government entities deliver the service, so critics characterized these schools as being private in public clothing (Thompson, Kowch, and Gereluk, 2016b).

### Elitism and Equity

Some in Alberta's educational establishment raised concerns that charter schools would be elitist, turning students away based on aptitude. The provincial government's 1995 *Charter Schools Handbook* spells out that charter schools cannot turn students away, if they have the capacity to take them on. Nor can they charge tuition, so concerns about financial elitism were dampened. The major argument against charter schools in Alberta is that they will undermine the public system (though others contend that they exist as a part of the public system), and that they are elitist. It is alleged that charter schools cater to an engaged demographic: parents who will research these schools and sign their children up, requiring time that struggling parents working



multiple jobs with no help may not have. This so-called elitism is an issue for two reasons: first, it may skew standardized test scores because charter school students may perform well regardless of which school they attend; and second, if something is elite then perhaps it shouldn't be funded. The ATA claims that charter schools "promote the segregation of children and create social fragmentation" (ATA, n.d.b), as they eschew the one-size-fits-all approach of traditional public schools.

However, alternative programs exist within Alberta's traditional public schools and could be accused of segregating students in the same fashion. These programs allow public schools to be selective in which students they admit and school boards may also charge fees. The Alberta government's *Alternative Program Resource Manual* characterizes these programs as somewhat of a response to the charter schools. The manual explains that boundaries were removed between school boards and charter schools were introduced in 1994. Then, in 2000 the *School Act* was revised to allow for alternative programs, engaging school boards, staff, school councils, and societies to support them (Province of Alberta, 2010). In this way, the introduction of charter schools may have caused traditional public schools to innovate. For example, the 1990s reformation of Edmonton Public Schools to incorporate choice programs within its system received international attention. Former Edmonton Public School Board superintendent Angus McBeath oversaw the changes, citing competition from independent and charter schools as a positive, motivating factor (Frontier Centre, 2005).

In Alberta, charter schools exist within a broader framework of choice. Parents can send their children to independent schools and their education tax dollars follow their child to that school, but they must pay at least a portion of the tuition and associated fees. As in every province, for wealthy families this is easy. For other families, the sacrifice involved might be worthwhile if their child's learning needs are dramatically better served by an independent school. But for families of lesser means, it is likely out of the question, as the money is not available. These families are not served by partially subsidized independent schools (other than in some cases where students may be eligible for bursaries, or in cases like Nova Scotia's Tuition Support Program, where the government fully funds independent school tuition for learning-disabled students in some areas). From this perspective, charter schools increase equity for students. In provinces where there are no funded alternative schools, only wealthier children may attend independent schools. In Alberta, children from all income levels may attend unique, independently operated educational institutions.



## Funding

Charter schools in Alberta cannot charge tuition. Government funding directed to all schools in Alberta is done primarily on a per-student basis. However, charter schools in Alberta do not receive funding for physical infrastructure. For context, in 2016/2017, the Alberta government provided \$1.8 billion in capital funding to public schools (Province of Alberta, 2016). In Alberta, charter schools are less expensive for taxpayers than traditional public schools. A Fraser Institute report found that per-pupil funding for an Alberta public school in 2012/2013 was \$13,234 (Clemens, Van Pelt, and Emes, 2015). That figure includes capital funding and employee pension fund contributions. When applying that calculation to charter schools—in the 2016 school year, based on \$83 million spent on charter schools and a total enrolment of 9,275 students—the Fraser Institute found that per-pupil funding was \$8,950 (Van Pelt and Clemens, 2016). Based on these numbers, the Alberta government’s per-pupil subsidy for charter school attendance saves \$4,284 annually for every student, versus public school.

Consider a brief counterfactual. Total student population in Alberta’s public, separate, independent, charter, provincial, and Francophone schools in 2016/2017 was 694,209. That includes 473,174 students in traditional public schools and 9,400 students in charter schools. Based on the Fraser Institute’s 2012/2013 numbers, if 50 per cent of Alberta’s 473,174 traditional public school students moved to charter schools, the savings would be over \$1 billion per year. Traditional public school funding includes capital costs and charter school funding does not, but the Alberta government only spends about 19 per cent of its education budget on capital costs per the 2016/2017 budget, while the rest is operational.



## Academic Performance: How Do Charter Schools Measure Up?

Standardized tests are important measurement tools for parents, teachers, and policy-makers alike, regardless of school choice. These tests can be used to encourage all schools to keep pace, and are doubly important when parents have a choice as to which school will best suit their child. This report examines student scores on Alberta's PATs, which are standardized tests administered annually in grades 6 and 9, and previously in Grade 3. These tests measure aptitude in English and French language arts, math, science, and social studies. Though standardized tests are the best measurement tool we have, they are imperfect—perhaps particularly for charter schools. The target demographics for charter schools vary. Some target students with interrupted learning due to various struggles. Others target academically enriched students. Comparing charter schools' test scores to the local public or independent school will have mixed results. In some cases, the scores may be worse, but the students may still benefit from the charter school's targeted outreach (something not captured by a test score, but that could be explored by looking at graduation rates). In others, charter school students may come from a self-selecting demographic, pushing the results upwards.

Alberta students are not strictly bound by catchment areas, meaning they can attend any school they choose, space permitting. This is especially true for charter schools, which don't cater to a local population the way traditional public schools do. Without having the home postal codes for every charter school student, tracking socioeconomic status is difficult. For this report, we will assume that the student populations in most Alberta charter schools tend to be self-selecting. This doesn't mean the families are wealthier, but that they tend to have a high level of engagement, which might be on par with selective public schools with audition or test-based entrances. Charter schools seek to involve parents more, so we can assume that parents who seek involvement, seek out charter schools.

In 2013, the C.D. Howe Institute published research finding that after controlling for socioeconomic status, Alberta charter schools outperform traditional public, separate, and private schools. The only consistent, significant gap between school types in achieving what Johnson (2013) calls the standard of excellence was between charter schools and all other schools, and it was found across grades 3, 6, and 9. Relative to public school results, charter school students in Grade 3 were 18.8 per cent more likely to achieve a standard of excellence, 15.6 per cent more likely in Grade 6, and 14.1 per cent more likely in Grade 9. Here, we see that charter schools' outstanding performance results cannot be explained away by factoring out socioeconomic status.



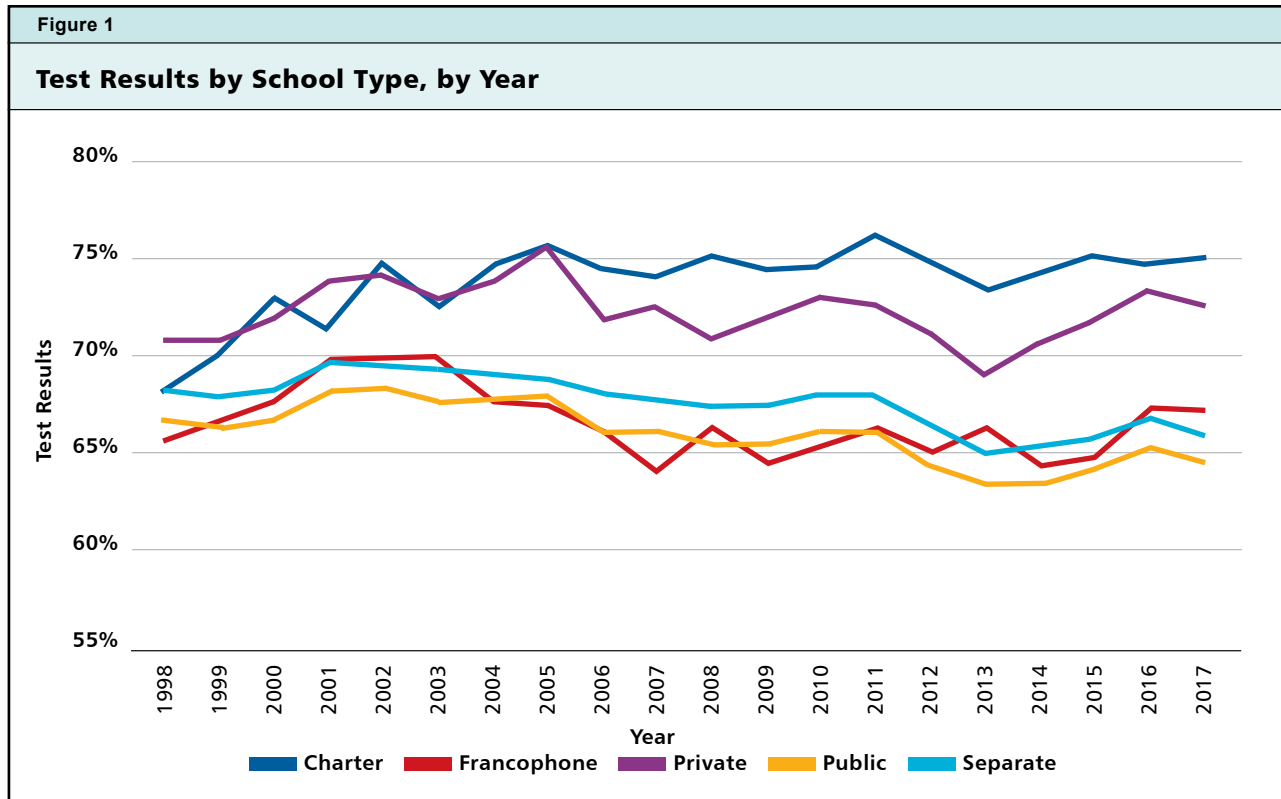
Johnson hypothesized that the gap may be explained by several factors, the first being that charter schools can be selective, choosing the best students. However, private schools would also have this advantage, possibly to an even greater extent. Johnson also speculated that charter schools may be able to hire better teachers, and that charter schools' mandates to meet the needs of students, parents, and teachers may give them an edge.

## **An Analysis of Provincial Achievement Test Score Data**

This report looks at Alberta PAT scores for grades 6 and 9 for charter schools, independent (private) schools, traditional public schools, separate (Catholic) schools and Francophone schools, between the school years 1997/1998 and 2016/2017. Grade 3 PAT scores have been omitted, because the tests were administered only until the 2012/2013 school year. After June 2014, the government switched to student learning assessments for Grade 3. Optional for teachers, these tests are therefore a significantly less reliable tool for measuring student achievement. Test results from First Nations schools are omitted. These students take PATs but provincial policy does not govern their schools. Provincial schools for students in institutions such as hospitals are omitted, but did not significantly change the data. The Fraser Institute, which publishes annual report cards for schools in Alberta and other provinces, provided the PAT score data. The data made available began in the 1997/1998 school year.

The figures below represent combined averages of Grade 6 and Grade 9 PAT scores. Years during which students at a charter school did not complete PATs, for unknown circumstances, have been removed. Students may be exempt from taking PATs for various reasons, including catastrophic events such as the Calgary floods or Fort McMurray wildfires. The data reflect the years that charter schools were in operation and administering PATs.



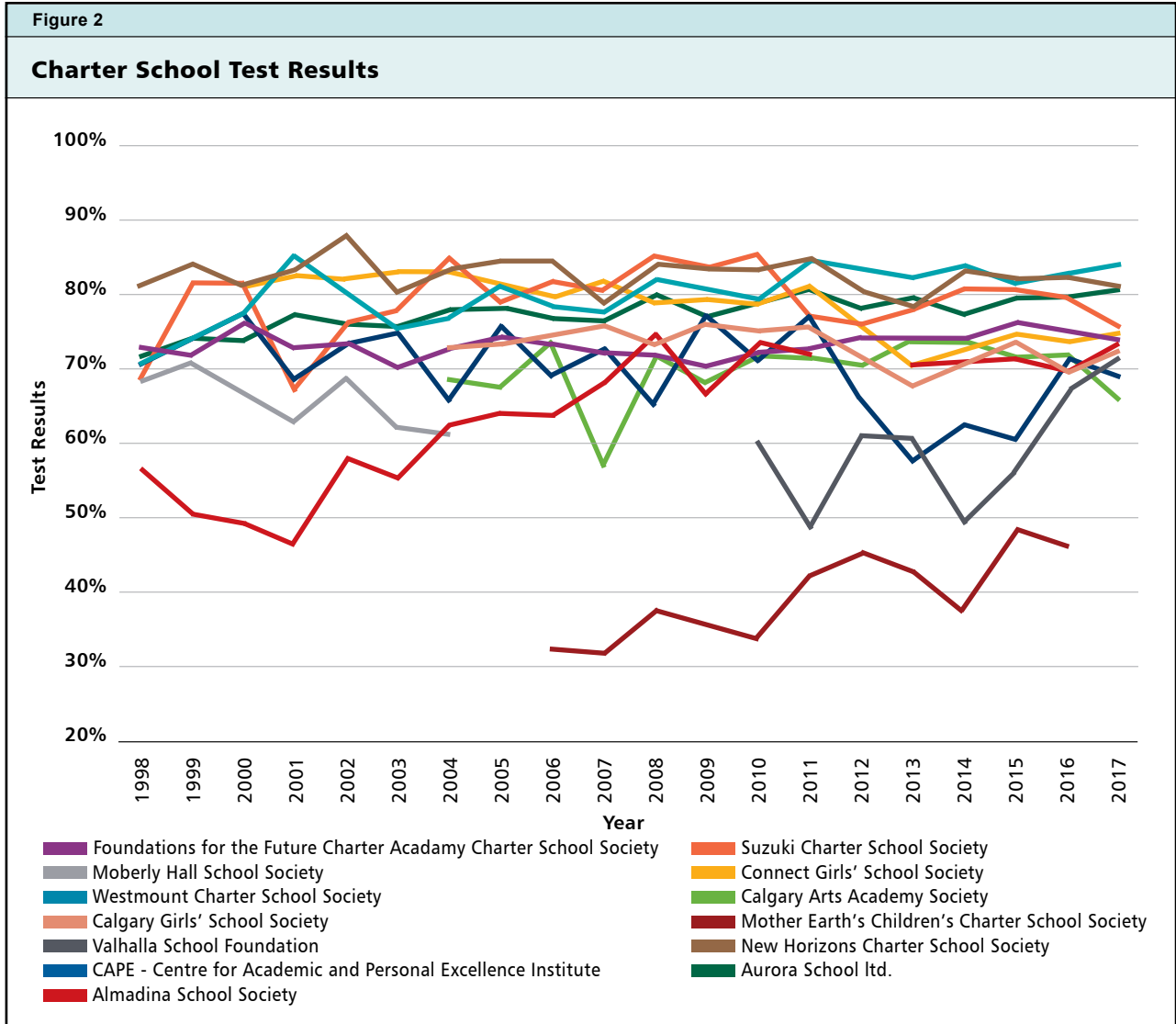


Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data.

Figure 1 shows the combined Grade 6 and Grade 9 PAT results from the 1997/1998 to 2016/2017 school years, aggregated by school authority type. Though Francophone schools dip significantly in some years, traditional public schools tend to perform the worst on average. By comparison, charter schools almost always outperform all other types of schools—most notably, private schools.

When attempting to measure charter schools’ success, it is helpful to isolate them from other schools and measure each individual school against itself over time.



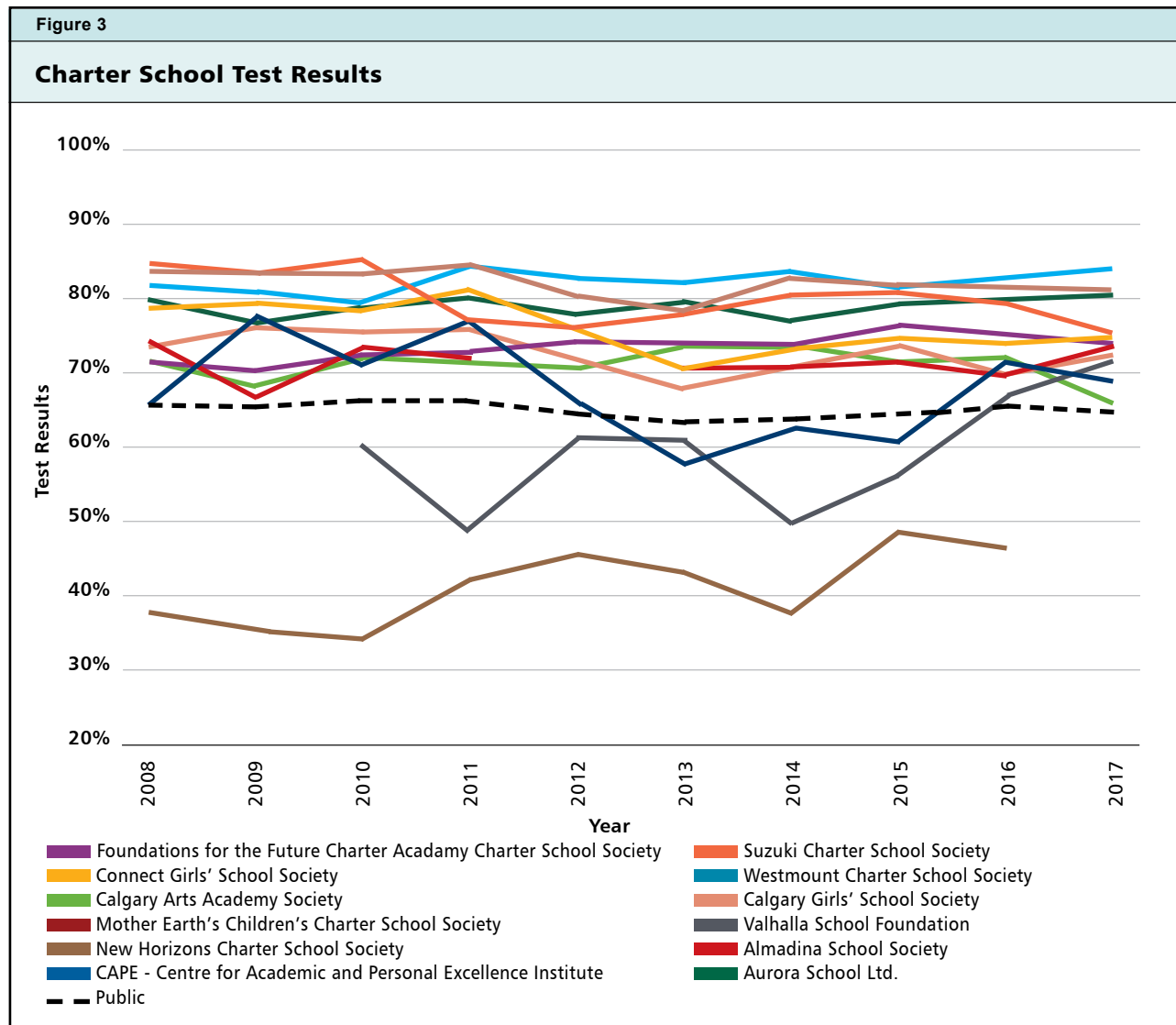


Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data.

Figure 2 tracks the combined Grade 6 and Grade 9 PAT scores of individual charter schools between 1997/1998 and 2016/2017. The data for each school start when test scores have been recorded. Most charter schools cluster around a relatively high average score and have stayed at a consistent level over this period. The more poorly performing schools have improved over time, with one exception.

Given the improvement, and the fact that Alberta’s standardized tests have changed over this period, it is useful to look at these test results over the last 10 years.





Source: Fraser Institute PAT score data.

Figure 3 illustrates the combined Grade 6 and Grade 9 PAT scores for individual charter schools over the last 10 years. To put these scores in perspective, the thick dotted line is an average of all PAT scores at traditional public schools. Three charter schools performed worse than the public school average during this period, but two of those schools improved significantly and surpassed the public school average toward the end of this period. Mother Earth's Children's Charter School Society, a First Nations charter school, underperformed traditional public schools. However, to get a clearer idea of this school's success, future research could compare these results to other First Nations schools.

The data make it clear that without controlling for socioeconomic status, charter schools on average outperform all other types of schools in Alberta. This is particularly significant when comparing charter schools to private (independent) schools.



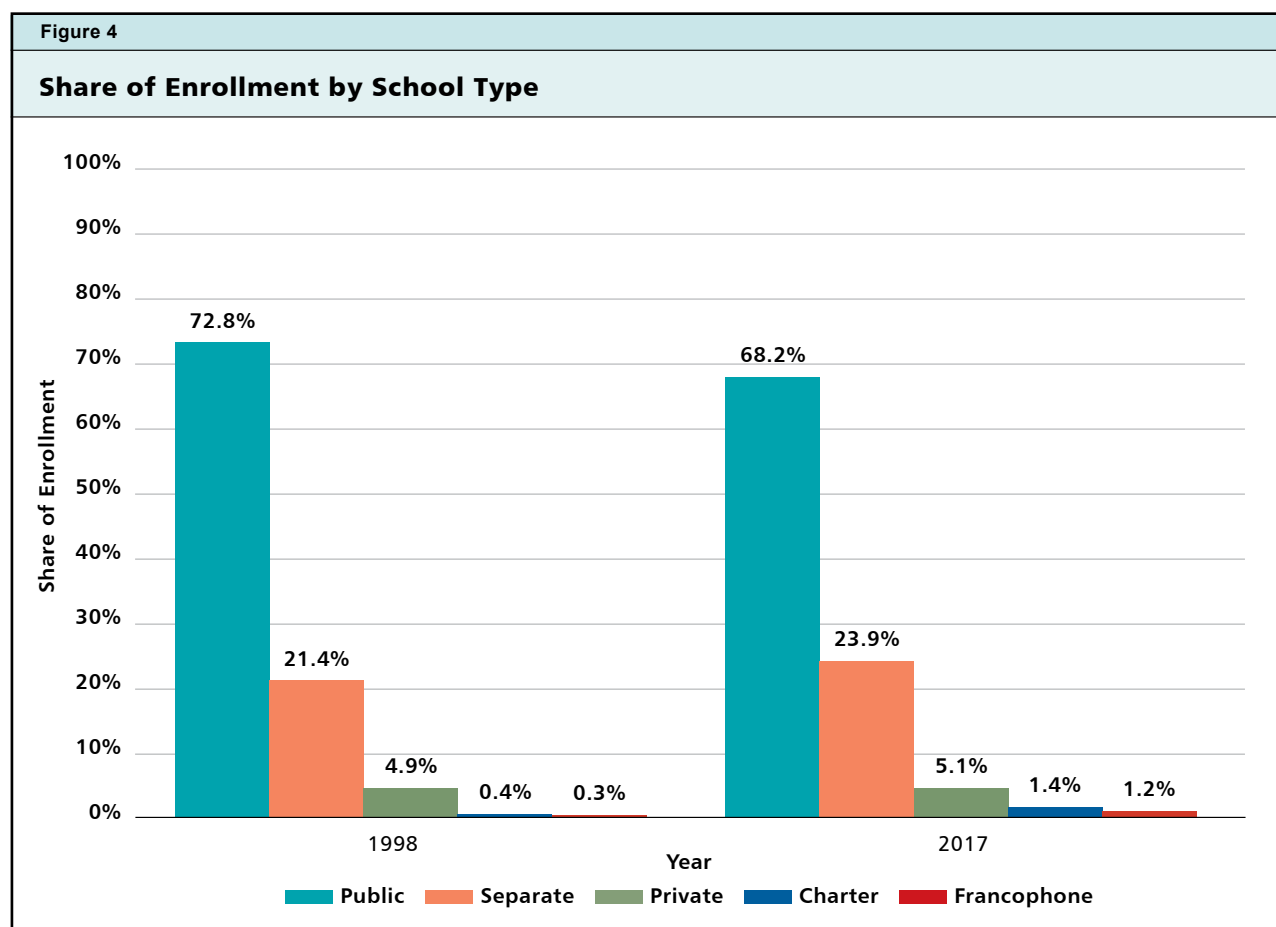


Independent schools, which require some tuition from parents, perform worse on average than charter schools, which are wholly government-funded for parents. This may be partially explained by the fact that 61.1 per cent of independent schools in Alberta are religiously affiliated. Religiosity doesn't preclude a school from focusing on academic achievement, but these schools necessarily recruit from a narrow religious base. In addition, eight per cent of Alberta's independent schools are special education schools (Allison, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2016). However, charter schools also offer a diverse range of focus. Some Alberta charter schools recruit academically gifted students, but others target students who've had educational struggles. With only 13 charter schools, each school significantly impacts the average test scores. Most charter schools steadily achieve high average scores, and those with erratic individual scores have improved since 2012/2013.



## Enrolment

Charter schools have developed a reputation for being sought after. A CBC (2015) report noted that 11,000 students were on the waitlist for Foundations for the Future Charter Academy. The report quoted Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools co-president Judy Gray that most charter schools have waitlists and some parents call from the hospital following the birth of their child. A *Calgary Herald* report quoted Connect Charter School principal Darrell Lonsberry saying on the day parents call to reserve a spot, the list snowballs to 400 names in a few hours (Durrie, 2015). Only 1.4 per cent of Alberta’s school-age population attends charter schools. Enrolment has steadily increased, but waitlists are well documented in the research. This report examines the percentage of students enrolled in each school type relative to the total school-age population, as well as the relative growth rates of enrolment in each school type. These data provide a clearer picture of the demand for charter and alternative schools.

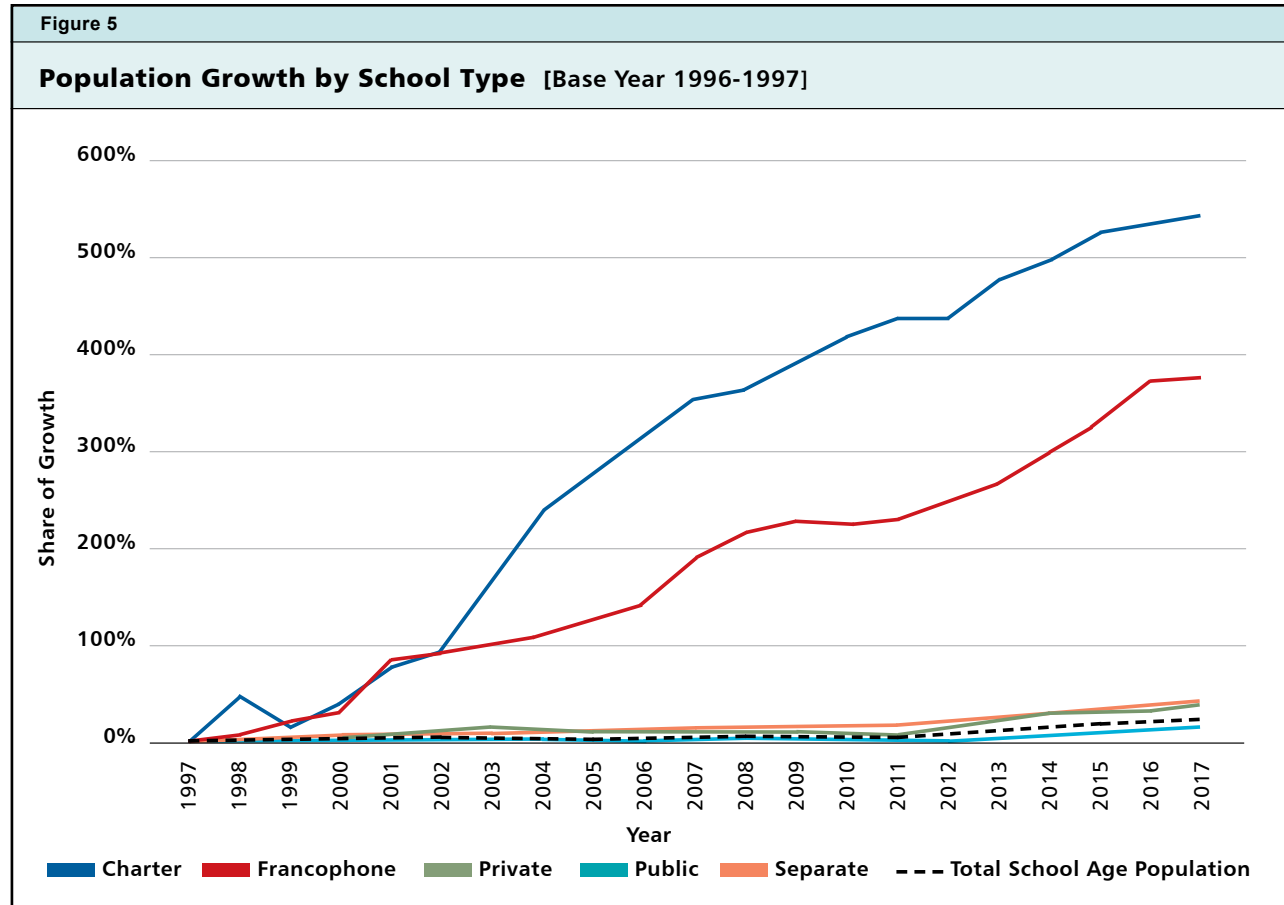


Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal.

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so “1998” refers to the 1997/1998 school year.



Despite the options available, traditional public schools enrol by far the largest share of school-age children in Alberta. Separate schools enrol the second largest share, followed by private, then charter and Francophone. As Figure 4 illustrates, every other school type has increased enrolment since 1997/1998 at the expense of traditional public enrolment—the only school type that has experienced a declining share of student enrolment.

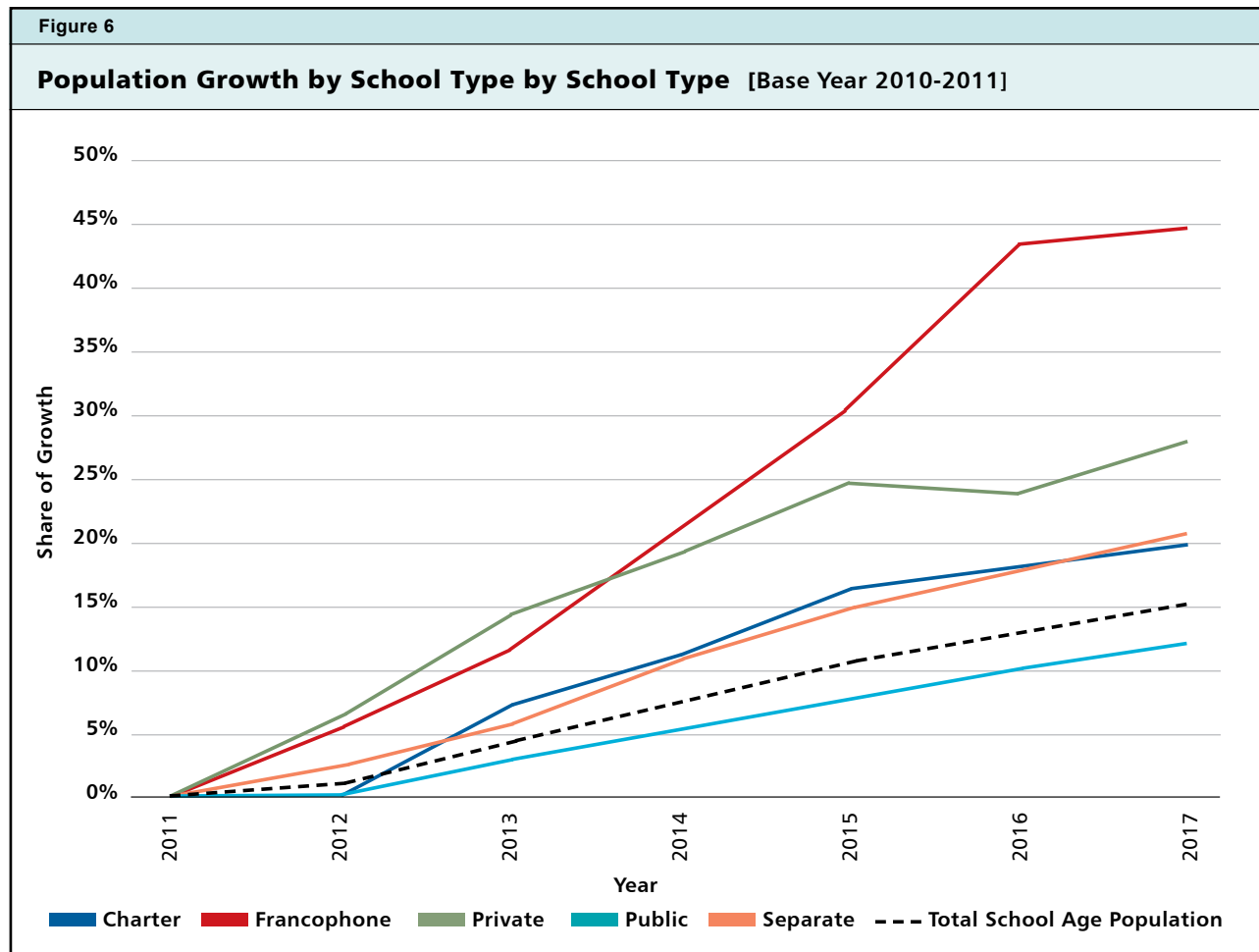


Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal .

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so “1997” refers to the 1996/1997 school year. The first charter schools opened in Alberta in 1995. The data sets made available by Alberta Education appeared incomplete in 1994/1995 and 1995/1996, so 1996/1997 is used as the base year.

It is not surprising that, compared to the base year, enrolment in Alberta charter schools appears to have exploded between 1996/1997 and 2016/2017 in Figure 5. During this time, new charter schools opened and the public became more familiar with them. Charter and Francophone schools enrol the smallest proportion of the student population, but they are the fastest growing. This can partially be explained by the fact that one new charter school represents substantial growth within that category, while one new traditional public school does not. It may also reflect a growing desire for alternative school programming.





Source: Government of Alberta Open Data Portal.

Note: The base years in the X axis represent the graduation year, so “2011” refers to the 2010/2011 school year.

Looking at a more recent time frame, using 2010/2011 as the base year with every subsequent year compared to it, we get a clearer picture of student enrolment in an environment where charter schools exist in a more established form. Figure 6 illustrates that enrolment growth in charter, Francophone, separate, and private schools has outpaced total school-age population growth since 2010/2011. Public school growth closely mimics the growth in the total school-age population, but falls below it in relative terms. In Alberta’s choice system, the growth of public school enrolment lags that of the total school-age population. Alberta families appear to be selecting alternative school options. Meanwhile, regulatory and practical barriers cap and constrain charter schools’ growth.



## Legislative Framework

The legislation and regulation governing charter schools in Alberta both facilitates and constrains their development. Charter schools are subject to much of the same legislative framework as public schools, with some exceptions. They typically face fewer regulations than public schools (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2015a).

The Charter Schools Regulation of Alberta's *School Act* (Province of Alberta, 2002b) imposes a cap of 15 on the number of charter schools which may operate. Though the regulation's wording ambiguously refers to charter schools, the cap applies to 15 school authorities, which can each operate more than one school facility. As of 2018, there are 13 charter school authorities in Alberta, with 23 school campuses. To open a charter school, a charter society must approach the local school board with its proposed alternative program—something not offered by the local public schools. The board then has 60 days to refuse or agree to offer that program. If they refuse, they notify the society (Province of Alberta, 2002c) and the society may apply to the education minister to establish a charter school.

Charter schools operate for designated terms of five years, after which a school must re-apply for renewal. The maximum term renewal of a charter school is 15 years. To be renewed, charter school authorities must demonstrate that they are meeting their objectives, operating a sound financial program, meeting provincial student performance measures, and receiving community and parent support. The education minister can provide recommendations to the charter school, and the school authorities then have two years to implement them. Once the minister makes a decision about the school's renewal, it is final. There is no appeal process.



## Barriers Facing Alberta Charter Schools

### Regulatory Barriers

Alberta charter schools face two main regulatory barriers: the imposed cap on their number, and the process by which charter societies must apply to open a school. The imposed cap creates a clear barrier. Though some charter school authorities have mapped out expansion plans within this framework by opening new campuses to house more students, the cap is an issue for new charter societies, curbing the potential for diversity in the system. Demand for charter schools has been increasing, yet with only 13 charter school authorities in Alberta, despite the cap allowing for 15, other barriers may be having an impact. The traditional public school board in the area in which a charter society wishes to open a school may stop that society's efforts by offering a comparable program. This may be aided by the education minister, who has final say on a charter school's establishment. Alberta's Department of Education does not collect information regarding applications received and rejected by school authorities, but since 2010 there have been nine applications for charter schools, illustrating that at least some have been denied (Brown, 2018). In 2016, Education Minister David Eggen rejected two charter school applications—one Spanish-language school with a science focus and one special-needs school—saying they were too similar to existing public school programming (CBC, 2016). That is the most common reason for the minister to deny charter school applications. It is also possible that the defined term limits create an uncertain atmosphere among teachers, parents, and administrators (Ritchie, 2010b). This limiting time frame places an administrative barrier on charter schools with which other schools do not have to contend.

Charter schools face regulatory constraints on the physical spaces in which they operate, requiring additional time from administrators. Each school must first negotiate with the nearby public school board prior to acquiring space from these boards or building new spaces (Thompson, Kowch, and Gereluk 2016c). Of the 23 buildings housing charter schools in Alberta, 20 are owned by school districts (Province of Alberta, 2018).

### Political Barriers

Before the Alberta PC Party was voted out of office in 2015, the government had made clear its intentions to remove the cap on charter schools. Following the 2015 election, the new NDP government put an end to those plans. Groups opposed to charter schools quickly took advantage of the government's dampened enthusiasm, launching campaigns to cut funding for independent schools and "end Alberta's



charter schools experiment” (Public Interest Alberta, 2016), or incorporate existing charter schools into traditional public schools (Global Edmonton, 2016). Additionally, in most Canadian provinces, teachers’ unions carry political influence and often spend money advertising during elections. The common opposition to charter schools among teachers’ unions creates a political challenge.

A 2010 Canada West Foundation report found there is a persistent lack of public knowledge around charter schools, as has been documented by Alberta government surveys (Ritchie, 2010c). With no charter schools in other provinces, public knowledge may be even less. Without a strong public understanding of charter schools, there is little political incentive for vote-seeking elected officials to encourage them.

## **Funding Barriers**

Charter schools face two main funding barriers: transportation and capital. Most school boards cannot afford to fund transportation for students outside of the school’s vicinity (Bruce et al., 1997b). For a charter school program to be as successful as possible, funds may need to be allocated to transportation. In terms of capital, Alberta charter schools do not receive funding. Ritchie (2010d) notes that they have trouble securing long-term loans required to build new schools and are unable to access municipal reserve lands due to their tenuous status. Instead, they rent or lease school facilities, for which the government provides some money. This involves onerous start-up costs and maintenance. Providing charter schools with capital funding could remedy this, but it would make them more expensive. In Alberta, the government forgoes transportation and capital funding. The trade-off may be a substantial barrier to more charter schools opening.

## **Practical Barriers to Charter School Success**

Parents might be hesitant to send their children to a charter school outside of their neighbourhood because they may prefer that their children have local friends and extracurricular activities. Parents may also have difficulty hearing about schools outside of their neighbourhoods (Bruce et al., 1997c), which a need to disseminate more information about charter school availability to the public.



## The Potential For Expanding Charter Schools Into Other Canadian Jurisdictions

In terms of educational choice, there is an invisible line drawn on the Ontario-Manitoba border, west of which students have a broad variety of accessible education options, and east of which students have very few (excluding Quebec). There is some level of choice within traditional public schools in many provinces, including limited programs for academically gifted students, those with an extracurricular or International Baccalaureate (IB) focus, French students or First Nations students, but these programs are only in select areas. For all families to truly have choice, a diverse range of school options must be accessible to all income levels. Introducing charter schools in Atlantic Canada and Ontario could be particularly beneficial. As the Atlantic Provinces grapple with aging populations, outmigration and declining enrolment, charter schools offer a lower-cost delivery model that could deliver great results in urban and rural areas. The following is a brief review of each provincial education system in Atlantic Canada and Ontario through the lens of school choice, assessing how easy it is for parents to choose the right education for their child, without allocating funds beyond their taxes.

### Ontario

Ontario ranks low on the school choice scale. Students may be home-schooled or attend independent schools, but receive no government funding. Ontario students may attend fully funded traditional public schools, French public schools, Catholic schools, and French Catholic schools—the latter two offering an added level of choice relative to the Atlantic Provinces. Within the public system there are some small alternative programs in select locations. For example, the Toronto District School Board (n.d.) offers two funded Africentric schools, and programs in fine arts, IT, and athletics.

### New Brunswick

New Brunswick students only have three government-funded options: English and French traditional public schools, or English public schools with French immersion, which does not exist in all areas (Province of New Brunswick, n.d.). Though student enrolment is declining, enrolment in French immersion is increasing (Poitras, 2017). Students are bound by catchment areas. A CBC news report on a town hall about a Fredericton high school catchment area changing documented the distress of parents whose children would be pushed to a new school—particularly for one autistic child (Drost, 2016). Some parents threatened to move if the boundary changed.





This illustrates how catchment areas restrict choice, particularly for those with learning challenges.

## **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia students are bound by catchment areas and have few government-funded school options: traditional public schools, French immersion, and French first-language programs. Students who are home-schooled or attend independent schools receive no funding (Province of Nova Scotia, 2018a). There is also some flexible programming, but it is limited. Nova Scotia offers one program which raises the level of choice above the rest of Atlantic Canada. The Tuition Support Program is a government-funded voucher system for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism spectrum disorder, or another learning disability (Province of Nova Scotia, 2018b and 2018c). These students must be signed up for a designated or registered special education independent school and must have first attended public school, determining that it could not meet their needs.

## **Prince Edward Island**

Prince Edward Island offers little school choice to parents and students. The province funds English traditional public schools, roughly half of which offer French immersion, and six French schools. Students who are home-schooled or attending independent school receive no funding (Province of Prince Edward Island, 2017).

## **Newfoundland and Labrador**

Since the 1998/99 school year, Newfoundland and Labrador has two school boards, both public: an English board, where french immersion is available, and a french board. Students who are home-schooled or attending independent schools receive no government funding (Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2017). French immersion schools are an option; however, transportation for students outside of their school district is not available.

## **Policy Models to Improve Educational Choice**

A few basic policies could increase parental and student choice and potentially simplify the introduction of charter schools. First, loosening the strict enforcement of catchment areas would open many new options to students. Second, ensuring schools are primarily funded using a money-follows-the-student model of funding, based on enrolment, allows schools to be responsive to demand. Third, all provinces currently employ standardized testing, which is crucial in ensuring all schools keep pace.



In political climates like Ontario's, where government funding for independent schools is politically controversial (CBC, 2007), charter schools may be a good option to expand student choice. Governments can set limits on which types of charter schools can open (for example, prohibiting them from being religious) and can mandate that they be non-profit. By introducing charter schools, unique educational approaches can be offered beyond the more limited alternative programming in traditional public schools. It is reasonable to assume that these programs' costs are lower in charter schools, based on Alberta's per-student costs for charter schools vs. traditional public schools, and operating cost comparisons in the U.S. This is noteworthy for Ontario and Atlantic Canada, where government debt is of concern and costly health-care demands are increasing.

Other Canadian provinces may learn from the U.S. case study and benefit from using the charter school model to better engage disadvantaged students. In the U.S., charter schools are often designed to focus on students in poverty or with poor academic performance. This is particularly true in urban charter schools (Bosetti, Brown, Hasan, and Van Pelt, 2015b), and these students appear to have benefited the most from U.S. charter schools.



## Conclusion

More than 20 years after charter schools were introduced in Alberta, the policy experiment has been successful, yet the schools face significant challenges restricting their potential. Based on a review of provincial achievement test data and enrolment numbers, the findings in this report corroborate those from other studies of Alberta charter schools: they outperform all other types of schools, on average, including independent schools. When broken down school by school, most Alberta charter schools perform strongly on PATs, and those below the rest show improvement over the last six years. Since 2010/2011, enrolment in Alberta charter schools has outpaced total school-age population growth, and growing enrolment in all forms of schools other than traditional public schools shows a clear demand for alternative educational choices.

## Policy Recommendations

In five other Canadian provinces—Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador—families have very few educational options outside of the traditional public system, and no Canadian jurisdiction outside of Alberta permits charter schools. For these provinces, charter schools offer a compelling educational policy alternative for students seeking unique learning approaches. The schools can be more responsive to community demand, without the cost for parents required by independent schools. The financial accessibility of charter schools makes them a strong policy option to give students of all income levels the opportunity to attend diverse, independently operated schools, from which government can demand a high level of accountability. Charter schools also represent significant cost savings compared to traditional public schools. All Canadian provinces could leverage the charter school model to better target disadvantaged student populations with the goal of engaging them in the classroom and improving student outcomes. Charter schools add a layer of competition that may also improve results at existing schools.

Lifting the regulatory and practical restrictions on charter schools is a worthwhile policy initiative for Alberta. Removing the cap on the number of charter schools, and the requirement for local school boards to serve as gatekeepers between charter authorities and the education minister, would assist charter school growth. The Alberta government could also consider some level of funding for transportation and capital for charter schools.

Introducing charter schools in other jurisdictions would not come without political challenges, but the Alberta model offers a helpful framework for what to do and what



not to do. Ultimately, there is significant potential for charter school expansion in Alberta and across Canada—particularly in Atlantic Canada and Ontario—representing a new realm of diverse educational options for students across the country.



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