



Re-thinking education

Helping you help your children is the goal of accountability and transparency in education. The seventh annual AIMS Report Card of the region's high schools book-ends our special education report. Last year, the business community showed us ways it is helping to make schools better. This year we ask: Can school choice help create the next generation of entrepreneurs?

To view the complete Report Card go to www.aims.ca/aimslibrary.asp

Thinking outside the schoolyard

How school choice could help create the next generation of entrepreneurs

BY DAWN HENWOOD

When Barb Stegemann became dissatisfied with the quality of education her child was receiving in Grade 1, she did what she had to do—she started packing. Within three weeks, she had sold her house outside Vancouver, moved to a new area, and enrolled her child in the school of her choice. After hearing Stegemann’s story, the principal of that school cautioned, “You can’t pack up and move every time you’re not happy with the teacher.” Stegemann responded, “Just watch me.”

An author and motivational speaker now based in Bedford, N.S., Stegemann has made it her mission to encourage people to shape their own destiny. Parents, she says, need to take charge of their children’s education. “You are your child’s first teacher. If you’re not satisfied, do everything in your power to get your child the right education.”

In theory, any family can do what Stegemann did and move to its preferred school zone. Or, parents can choose from a growing range of independent schools. In reality, though, few families can tolerate the upheaval and expense of frequent moves, or spare thousands of dollars per child each year for annual tuition fees.

For Atlantic Canadians, educational choice comes with a discouragingly high price tag. Elsewhere in Canada and other countries, people are experimenting with creative ways to pull down the barriers to choice and give parents more decision-making authority. “School choice” has become a banner slogan uniting parents and educators who want to make schooling more diverse and innovative.

Advocates of school choice make bold claims. They say that the laws of economics and the basic principles of human liberty are on their side. And, they point to compelling stories—some within Canada—to show how unlocking education can move innovation and entrepreneurship from the periphery of education to the centre.

Reframing education in economic terms

In his book *The School Choice Wars*, American economist John Merrifield explores various means of cracking the government’s near-monopoly on education. One such way is through charter schools, independent public schools that negotiate a special agreement, or “charter,” with the government so they can teach the standard curriculum in an innovative way. For example, the Calgary Science School’s mandate is to weave math, science, and technology throughout its curriculum, emphasizing principles of scientific inquiry. So far, Alberta is the only Canadian province to permit charter schools.

Another way to promote choice is to erase the catchment lines for public schools so children can attend any school in the district. Edmonton has led the way with this “open boundaries” concept, and British Columbia is now



Education should nurture entrepreneurial characteristics.

following suit. Provincial governments can also encourage educational diversity by providing funding to independent schools, as they do selectively in B.C., Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Quebec.

More radical proponents of choice advocate for tuition vouchers, rebates, or tax credits. Such programs broaden the options for parents who would prefer to send their children to independent schools. In Milwaukee, for instance, children from low-income families can apply for a voucher to attend one of the city's many private schools. In Atlantic Canada, Nova Scotians can take advantage of a limited tuition-rebate program for children with learning disabilities.

So-called "funded school choice" initiatives more closely approach the entrepreneurial model of education that Merrifield describes as his ideal. If he had his way, we'd see a wide-open educational market with schools competing as intensely for students as Coca-Cola and Pepsi vie for consumers. To economists, says Merrifield, "education is just another industry," and the way to improve the quality of the product is to enable greater competition.

But yoking together "education" and "industry" in the same sentence causes some policy-makers to shudder. They warn that school choice will create unequal opportunities for rich and poor students, erode the quality of instruction, and result in administrative chaos. Even the much-praised Edmonton public system isn't immune to charges of inequality, as parents must pay for special program fees as well as transportation. As for charter schools, critics accuse them of catering to special-interest groups at taxpayers' expense.

Those who are wary of school choice tend to view education primarily as a moral or ethical undertaking, and they're suspicious of those who take an economic perspective. Calvin Fraser, the secretary general of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, explains why his organization vigorously opposes the open-market concept of education, which he views as being based on flawed premises: "It assumes that everyone has the same information, opportunities and constraints to make the best choices for our children's education. Increased choice and access to resources (financial or otherwise) go hand in hand. If market forces improve the quality of education, they do so only for a select few at the expense of the vast majority."

While Merrifield appreciates the moral and ethical complexity of educational debates, he insists that education primarily is an economic activity involving the production, distribution, and consumption of a vital service. Whatever noble ideas we hold about that activity, as a society we need to figure out how to use resources effectively to provide a high-quality output and make it widely available.

"I don't have any objection to seeing things from all different perspectives," says Merrifield. "But you have to understand that there are limited resources. There are things like comparative advantages and disadvantages, which are just basic economic concepts. And they're at work in education like they are anywhere else. If you ignore them, you get the education system we have."

Merrifield's "we" includes Canada. In his former role as a senior fellow with the Fraser Institute, he co-published a 2006 study entitled *Why Canadian Education Isn't Improving*; it paints a



Students at Halifax's independent Shambhala School

picture of government-run schools that contradicts the idealistic rhetoric of public system loyalists. It argues that "political control" of education seldom achieves the lofty goals of universal empowerment. Instead, it leads to a "compliance-driven" education system that's lackadaisical about performance and resistant to change.

Transforming principals into entrepreneurs

In most public school systems, principals are like middle managers in a hierarchical organization; they may sit in a corner office but they command little authority. In Edmonton, on the other hand, principals act like franchise owners. They control most of the school budget, which is assigned to them based on the number of students they enroll. If they want to keep their franchise open, they must play a competitive game. Edmonton principals have become what American educators Charles Lavaroni and Donald Leisey call "edupreneurs." Working within the government system, they must define their competitive advantage, create a strategic plan, deliver a high-quality service, and build client loyalty.

An Edmonton school attracts students by developing a unique profile. For instance, a school may specialize in academic enrichment, fine arts, sports, or the ability to meet special needs. To encourage differentiation, the Edmonton school board has eliminated catchments, a designation to a school based on the area in which you live. With "open boundaries," parents can send their children to any school in the city without needing special permission.

As any businessperson would predict, the competitive environment produces higher-quality results. Consistently, Alberta leads the country in standardized test scores, and educators from around the world visit the province to witness the Edmonton system in action. As noted previously, Alberta is the only province with charter schools. It also provides accredited independent schools with 60% to 70% of the per-student funding it gives public schools.

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Widening the playing field even further

While the Edmonton model represents radical innovation within the government system, Merrifield envisions education leaders going even further. He imagines them behaving as full-fledged entrepreneurs in a completely open educational market. In Merrifield's ideal world, schools would be smaller than today's government schools, and they would niche themselves in the market in creative ways. They might distinguish themselves by their pedagogy or cater to the needs of a particular student group. For example, a school might target high-achieving students and make enrichment its value-add, as does Lakecrest St. John's Independent School in Newfoundland and Labrador. Or a school could tailor its curriculum and environment to students with attention difficulties, following in the footsteps of Churchill Academy in Dartmouth.

If Merrifield's right, opening the educational industry would foster healthy competition that would raise quality standards throughout the market. At the same time, it would also promote two key competencies for the 21st century: inventive-ness and interpersonal skills.

Rather than teaching creative thinking as an academic goal, schools would embody creativity in their curriculum, buildings, organizational charts, hiring practices, and teaching methods. Rather than treating social skills as an outcome of group project work, small schools would develop a strong community culture to support positive relationships among teachers, students, and parents.

Unleashing the freedom to create

In a deregulated educational industry, more institutions like the Shambhala School in Halifax would likely flourish. Shambhala offers a nonsectarian curriculum to a diverse population of students from pre-Primary to Grade 12. Because it operates independently, the school can meet the provincial teaching outcomes on its own creative terms.

Music, painting, drama, dance, and handwork thread throughout each day for elementary students, so they absorb concepts in multiple ways. This artistic emphasis cultivates at a young age valuable right-brain capabilities—such as storytelling, visualization, and playful thinking—that companies now pay trainers top dollar to develop in their employees.

Besides developing their creative faculties, Shambhala students develop a strong sense of community responsibility. Small classes enable teachers to strengthen social skills without making them an item on a lesson plan. In the elementary school, children eat lunch together with the teacher at a long table, as if they were at a family meal. Should a conflict arise, teachers and students sit in a circle to discuss the problem and find a solution.

School director Steve Mustain says it's an "intimate and close-knit feeling of community and belonging" that gives Shambhala advantages over government-run schools. Shambhala staff can focus their energy not on complying with policies but rather on building a strong school culture to nurture their students.

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Unlocking the power of community spirit

In a deregulated education industry, we would also likely hear more grassroots success stories like the one Phil Giles has to tell. A business instructor and former entrepreneur, Giles has been teaching for more than 30 years. His career has spanned Newfoundland, Ontario, Alberta, and the entire gamut of the curriculum, from kindergarten gym classes to high school business courses.

Of all the places in which Giles has taught, he found the atmosphere most conducive to academic success at a small school in northwestern Ontario formed by a group of homeschoolers. Through an unusual bargain, the homeschoolers acquired an empty school building, which they agreed to heat and maintain if the public school board would provide teachers, curriculum, and supplies.

Within this creative arrangement, the homeschoolers have been able, like the Shambhala school, to foster a distinct school culture. In their case, that meant daily prayer, weekly worship, and freedom for teachers to air Christian perspectives. Thanks to the school's community bonds, Giles enjoyed excellent relationships with students and parents. "I don't think I've ever had a group of students that was more co-operative and eager to learn," he says. The positive environment translated into demonstrable academic achievement: in the annual Ontario student-business-plan competition, Giles's students ranked in the top five for five years in a row.

Nurturing an entrepreneurial character

A group of entrepreneurial parents organizes a school, and that school becomes a provincial leader in entrepreneurship education. We don't need a detailed causal analysis to see how that connection works. If Merrifield and his fellow school choice advocates carry the day, then a competitive educational industry will generate many more distinctive community-based schools that develop curious, energetic, young people.

Karen Donnelly, a project manager with the Centre for Women in Business at Mount Saint Vincent University, has chosen to place her son in an environment she believes helps children develop "confident, independent personalities." To find such a place, she went outside the government system to Sacred Heart School in downtown Halifax, where classes are much smaller than in her neighbourhood school and parents are welcomed into the classroom.

For Donnelly, education should nurture an entrepreneurial character, no matter what career path students choose. "I hope the learning environment not only teaches them their academics," she says, "but also teaches them to be confident people, believe in themselves, and to be able to make the correct career choice." Advocates of school choice would urge Atlantic policy-makers to follow suit—to create a more open educational market in which innovation and entrepreneurship would form the backbone of education and, by extension, the spine of our regional economy. 🌐

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Have we turned a corner?

Ups and downs in school grades

BY BOBBY O'KEEFE

Helping you help your child—that's what "accountability" and "transparency" in education ultimately mean. For seven years the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) and *Progress* have made it possible for you to do just that. We give you the means to find out for yourself what's really happening behind the high intimidating walls of our public schools. We highlight for you not only what questions to ask but also to whom you can turn for advice about how to fix things that have gone awry.

Are your children ready for life after school? For university? Community college? A job? Do they do well on math exams? Do most students at your local high school graduate? Do their teachers give them good grades? What challenges do students and teachers face?

Last year we reported that the international community was coming onside with AIMS's view that telling you—the parents, teachers, students, employers, taxpayers, and community members—what was going on inside your schools was the best way to make schools better. As one recent newspaper editorial put it, "Grading schools means changing expectations." Slowly but surely, it seems that the Departments of Education in the Atlantic provinces are getting that message too.

Newfoundland and Labrador remains the standard bearer for this. That province maintains a full set of performance measures, including exam results, average grades, enrollment, attendance, and graduates, for all of its schools. Even better, it keeps this information on its website for everyone to see.

Prince Edward Island reports more information about student literacy and math performance. It still doesn't have provincial exams for high school courses, but it continues to publicly release student results of elementary and middle school testing at the school level.

New Brunswick's anglophone and francophone sectors have stepped forward by introducing their own school report cards; in the past, they took backward steps by eliminating or reducing the number of high school provincial exams. The New Brunswick report cards include the average results for students at each school on every student assessment or exam, are distributed to every student and parent in the province, and are available online. New Brunswick is also looking at making changes to its access to information laws that will make it easier to get school-performance information from school districts, colleges, and universities.

AIMS has had several battles with Nova Scotia school boards to gain access to information on high schools in that province. Those battles are now paying off for everyone seeking more information about school performance. Nova Scotia now reports school-level results for provincial assessments in Grades 3, 6, and 9. The Department of Education collects Grade 12 provincial exam results, and in response to last year's High School Report Card announced it will release school-level results for all Grade 12 exams this year. Things are looking up, but there's still a long way to go. The next step is to give students, parents, the public, and even school staff the power to use that information.

Students and parents need the ability to choose from a variety of schools or programs, whether privately or publicly delivered, that best suits their needs, rather than being forced into a government school with a cookie-cutter approach. At the same time, giving schools authority over budget decisions to make the changes needed to improve the performance of their students and best serve the needs of their school community is just as crucial. These are all things the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported as important factors in improving school performance.

PROVINCIAL SCHOOL-PERFORMANCE SUMMARIES

New Brunswick anglophone

Upper Miramichi Regional High School in Boiestown achieved an A and returned to the top spot in New Brunswick's anglophone sector, the same spot it held in AIMS's Fifth Annual Report Card. Last year it was unranked because there wasn't enough information on its students' results at post-secondary institutions. Kennebecasis Valley High School maintained a B+ to take second place. Hartland Community School improved from a C+ to a B+ to rank third. Sir James Dunn Academy also saw a notable improvement, from B- to B+.

A few schools saw marked declines, including last year's top school. Grand Manan Community School dipped from an A- to a B- primarily due to a drop in achievement by its students in university and community college. Nackawic Senior High School fell from a B to a C, also due largely to a decline in post-secondary achievement.

New Brunswick francophone

As was the case last year, grades remained relatively consistent for schools in the New Brunswick francophone sector. École Marie-Gaétane stayed in the top spot for the third consecutive year, maintaining an overall grade of A-. École Sainte-Anne in Fredericton ranked second, also maintaining its grade of B+. Only École secondaire Népisiguit saw a change in grade of more than two levels, falling from a B to a C+ with a small decline in both achievement and engagement measures. This also marks the first time we have enough information to grade Moncton's École L'Odyssée since its opening in the 2005-06 school year, and it garnered a C-.

Newfoundland and Labrador

J.M. Olds Collegiate in Twillingate moved up a grade level this year, from B+ to A-, to become the top-ranked school in Newfoundland and Labrador. Bay d'Espoir in Milltown kept its B+ grade and moved up one place to second, while last year's top school, Gonzaga High School in St. John's, maintained a B+ grade but fell to third overall. Clarenville High School saw the biggest improvement from last year, rising from a B- to a B+. No

We highlight for parents not only what questions to ask but also to whom they can turn for advice about how to fix things that have gone awry

schools saw their overall grade fall by more than one grade level.

Perhaps the biggest story in Newfoundland and Labrador is the low number of schools receiving a final grade. In many cases this is because there are a large number of small schools, and we are unable to receive students' results from university and community college for those schools as a result of protection of privacy rules. This includes two private schools, St. Bonaventure's College in St. John's and Eric G. Lambert All Grade in Churchill Falls, which volunteered all of the data their schools were missing from the province's publicly available information but didn't receive a final grade because we couldn't collect the data from at least two post-secondary institutions with results for at least five students.

Nova Scotia

We have a couple of highlights in Nova Scotia this year. The first is the addition of four new measures. Thanks to AIMS's many battles with school boards over access to public information about school performance, everyone now has access to attendance rates, along with teacher-assigned grades in math, science, and language arts in Nova Scotia schools, information that was previously kept private. Even with the additional measures, the top two schools from last year's report card remain the same. Cape Breton Highlands Academy in Terre Noire and Charles P. Allen High School in Bedford both achieved A- grades to maintain first and second place in the Nova Scotia rankings. Cape Breton Highlands maintained its grade from last year, while C.P. Allen improved upon last year's B+. Barrington Municipal High School improved from a B and joined the top two schools with an A- to take third spot.

The second highlight is the separate ranking of schools in Nova Scotia's Conseil scolaire acadien provincial. Differences in provincial exams had kept us from doing a full comparison of these schools with their English counterparts in the past. While only a couple of schools have a final ranking this year (mainly due to the small enrollment that brings privacy issues into play), a separate analysis of these schools allows us to provide a wider range of data for anyone examining the perfor-

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In September 2008, twenty new students enrolled in a second cohort, which will graduate in October 2010.



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mance of these schools. École du Carrefour in Dartmouth received a final grade of B, while École secondaire de Par-en-Bas in Tusket earned a B-

Prince Edward Island

As in Newfoundland and Labrador, several schools in Prince Edward Island missed out on a final grade due to a lack of information on the achievement of Island students at university and community college. However, in Prince Edward Island this is more an issue of the lack of transparency, as the freedom of information laws don't apply to the Island's publicly funded post-secondary institutions. This has allowed the University of Prince Edward Island to opt out of providing data for the report card.

As a result of this lack of information, two of the top three schools from last year's Report Card did not receive a final grade this year, including last year's top school, Souris Regional High School. Kensington Intermediate Senior High moved up a grade level from a B- to a B and into top spot. Charlottetown Rural High School maintained its B and second spot in the rankings. No school saw a significant change in its overall grade.

Discussing change isn't change

Have we turned a corner? Perhaps, but only to find we've got a few more to get around. Having the information out in the open is great, but now it's time for the next corner. Look at the performance information found in the insert in this edition of *Progress* or at the AIMS online Report Card at www.aims.ca; remember that you need to consider more than just the final grade for any school. Check results on a variety of measures both relative to other schools ("absolute" grades) and against reasonable expectations for your particular school ("in context" grades).

If you find your school, your child's school, or your community's school is falling behind others in your province, ask why. Ask the principal and teachers what's getting in the way of making changes. Then ask yourself what you can do to make a difference and help our schools and our children make it around that next corner. 🌐

Bobby O'Keefe is the research manager for the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.



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Learning and loving it

A stimulating choice?

The many advantages of choosing your own school

BY CHARLES CIRTWILL

Progress has dedicated space in this edition to the concept of publicly funded school choice. The educational arguments for school choice are well laid out here and elsewhere, but in this time of economic downturn and panicked calls for government spending to “prime” our economic “pumps,” I offer one more reason to support choice: it’s economically stimulating.

It’s stimulating over the short, medium, and long term without spending one dollar more of your tax money. No deficits, no additional debt, no added taxes. Just stimulus.

In the short term, what better way to use half-empty school buildings and unemployed teaching graduates—two subjects that occasion regular hand-wringing in our government board-rooms and on our editorial pages—than by putting them to work doing what they were intended to do, educate kids? Looking to put carpenters, electricians,

revenue sources at a time when traditional tax bases have gone soft can leverage existing public investment with private funds, with far greater returns and far less risk than VLTs. School choice offers the opportunity to increase total spending on education while increasing per-pupil amounts available to government-run schools. The math is clear and simple; the impact almost immediate.

A government seeking to convince people to spend instead of save could find no better incentive than our children’s futures to convince us to open our wallets. School choice also offers government a way to work with, instead of against, communities desperate to save their school, such as St. Mary’s School in Halifax, or their cherished programs, including early French immersion in New Brunswick.

Medium and long term, school choice offers hope to the hopeless, the disengaged, the disenfranchised, and the

A government seeking to convince people to spend instead of save could find no better incentive than our children’s futures to convince us to open our wallets

plumbers, and painters to work? Expanded choice results in more working schools and offers the immediate potential for construction and renovation jobs. And don’t forget the jobs created for maintenance, administrative, and food-service staff.

From the government perspective it’s a winning proposition as well. A finance minister desperate to find additional

poorly served. Experts in the education field, such as Dr. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford and Dr. Howard Fuller (a former superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools), have demonstrated the benefits of educational choice for the most vulnerable among us.

Dr. Jay Greene of the University of Arizona, among others, has demonstrated the positive performance and



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funding effects of publicly funded choice on government schools and on the students, both those “left behind in” and those who “leave” government-run schools. And we need not look even that far for evidence of this fact. Nova Scotia already has publicly funded school choice, in the form of the tuition-support program for children facing special challenges. This program over the past several years has blended public and private funds to create a solution that works for the students that our government schools were failing, and failing spectacularly.

Opponents will tell you that simply increasing spending on government schools would supply similar stimulus. That is not the case. Choice begets more and different schools, innovative schools, and expanded private investment. Increased spending on existing government schools and government programs will give us none of those things.

Opponents will also tell you that every dollar supporting school choice is a dollar stolen from public schools. That simply isn't true. It's a dollar “stolen,” if stolen at all, from government-run schools. Government education and public education are not, and never have been, synonymous. And this money isn't stolen; it's public money that belongs to us, to spend as we see fit. If anything, it was stolen from us long ago, and we would simply be taking it back.

Spending this public money wisely is our right and our obligation. In fact, using public funds to support school choice and leveraging increased private spending at the same time would only bring us into line with most of the developed world and increasingly large swaths of the underdeveloped world as well.

Every public dollar is a public trust; we have an obligation to spend it to the maximum benefit for the taxpayer, for society, and for the person we are spending it to help. If we elect to deliver publicly funded education through a variety of means—means that encourage private spending on education to rise, means that drive down pupil-teacher ratios while driving up per-pupil spending—then we have demonstrated prudence, responsibility, and a clear and measurable return on our investment. What a stimulating change that would be. 🇨🇦

Charles Cirtwill is the executive vice-president of the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies.

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