

Charter Schools in Atlantic Canada:

An Idea Whose Time Has Come [Digital Edition]

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Just Imagine The Possibilities

Teachers and parents of an inner city public school in Los Angeles secure a charter and convert their school into a charter school. In the first year alone, \$1.2 million is saved. However, all that money stays right at the school site, providing for new computers and equipment, proper maintenance, and the construction of fourteen more classrooms. More teachers are hired. They are given greater authority and paid more. Children feel more secure and their achievement rapidly improves. Parents and teachers are thrilled.

Wouldn't this make sense in Atlantic Canada?

A group of frustrated teachers in Minnesota sense they can do better. They form a cooperative, a legal entity in their state, secure a charter and open their own public school. Together they determine which teaching methods and materials they will use, their teaching assignments, how the school is to be managed and even their own remuneration. The teachers are no longer employees, it is their own school. The issue of confrontational collective bargaining does not even arise.

Wouldn't this be welcome in the Atlantic provinces?

New charter schools escape excessively child centered and unproved reading programs and pedagogy. As their students begin to do better on state and provincial assessments, more and more parents choose such schools and their number expands. Within a short time, leaders of the existing school system come under enormous pressure to pay attention to the wishes and concerns of parents and to utilize research proven programs and pedagogy. As this competition of ideas unfolds, outcomes in the existing system begin to improve as well, fewer parents feel the need to choose charter schools and the approval ratings for public education improve.

Wouldn't this be thoughtful public policy for Atlantic Canada?

Charter Schools in Atlantic Canada? What a radical idea. Atlantic Canada's education system already lags behind the rest of Canada's in many ways. Jurisdictions right across North America, including those which already boast superior public education systems, have established charter schools because they clearly understand the advantages such schools offer public education. Can Atlantic Canada afford to fall even further behind? Would that be fair to its young people?

In fact, Atlantic Canadians now have an opportunity to go one better and lead Canada in establishing charter schools. Although close to five hundred charter schools have now been

established in the United States and thousands more in Britain and New Zealand, within Canada only Alberta has charter legislation. That legislation, however, is flawed, and Atlantic Canada can surely do better.

The charter idea is particularly important now that provincial governments are cutting expenditures. As will be discussed below, charter school legislation can produce a bigger bang for the educational buck. It holds forth the promise of saving good schools slated for closure, opening new and innovative schools and stimulating existing schools in the region to higher levels of performance.

Clearly, the Atlantic provinces have many parents and teachers who would be most interested in opportunities such as those described above. Thousands of parents feel that their schools and school boards are not responsive to their wishes, and many in the teaching community are sick at heart over teaching conditions, mounting stress, and a sense of helplessness. Many teachers feel that they have become scapegoats for a system that is not working well.

Could these dramatic scenarios occur in the Atlantic provinces? Well, for the many Atlantic Canadians who might ask, the answer is YES. But first your legislators will have to pass a charter law. You simply cannot start charter schools unless your province has such a law (and only Alberta does). Short of that, the best you can do is entreat, cajole, convince, bully, or bribe your school board into granting you an alternative model school with the characteristics you wish, something a charter law makes unnecessary (Freedman, 1995).

Chartering has a great deal to offer change-oriented governments. Since deficit reduction is the order of the day in many jurisdictions, the charter school idea makes perfect sense. If expenditures must be reduced (and fairness to future generations demands that), then what could make better sense than school site management of funds, elimination of layers of expensive (and meddlesome) bureaucracy, and real accountability for results. Beyond that, many observers feel that despite their good points, teachers' unions have become too large and powerful, and that school boards are simply not working well. They and many others (including teachers) are distressed by the constant, expensive, rancorous, and often disruptive process of collective bargaining.

Chartering offers a safe way of encouraging innovation and attempting to gain stronger educational achievement. It can also demonstrate a new level of responsiveness to parents and taxpayers, show that there is a different and more satisfying manner of staffing public schools, and provide teachers with far greater professionalism. In these and many other ways, the charter idea offers a fair and efficient way of managing change. It isn't the only strategy for reform, but it is one of the most promising and dynamic. The concept is sweeping across western democracies, including England, New Zealand, and the United States. Two years ago Alberta embraced the idea. Now it is time Atlantic Canada gave it a try. The region's governments are well aware of and actively discussing the charter school idea behind closed doors. Now is the time to press for an open public debate and, beyond that, for Canada's second charter school legislation.

Charter Schools: An Idea That Makes Sense

The essential idea is worth restating: It is to offer change-oriented educators or others the opportunity to go either to the local school board or to some other public body for a contract under which they would set up an autonomous (and therefore performance-based) public school which students could choose to attend without charge.

-TED KOLDERIE,
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A CHARTER SCHOOL is an *independent public school*. Its charter is a legally approved contract authorizing the school to conduct fully funded public education independent of the usual school board. Such a school is free from the steady stream of rules and directives from school board central office, restrictive conditions enforced by teachers' unions, and the many-inches-thick state or provincial "book of rules." By far, most of that has little to do with teaching children how to read, write and do their arithmetic. But chartering is not just about unrestricted freedom. Rather, the basic bargain is autonomy for accountability. This means that charter schools take on far greater accountability than regular public schools. Why? Because charter schools will be forced out of business if:

- Parents and teachers do not choose them;
- They violate the terms of their charter;
- They do not achieve the strong educational results specified in their charter.

Public schools have never faced such consequences. They simply continue on year after year. Poor achievement and behavior may result in a change of staff or greater attention by district officials, but the flow of money and children assigned to the school continues no matter what happens. That is not the case with charter schools. Clearly, this is a whole new order of accountability for public education.

Charter schools are schools of choice within the public system: choice for parents and choice for teachers. The charter is term-limited for only three to five years, after which it must be renewed. Full per pupil funding flows from government directly to the school. There are no bureaucratic middlemen. Total school funding is based on student enrollment. Generally, the school is waived free of all the school board's regulations and all those of the province (except health and safety). Of course, the school must accept the curricular objectives of the province and submit its students to all required testing. Many charter schools, however, have opted for more demanding testing than that undertaken at other schools in the local district.

Charter Schools are NOT Private Schools in Disguise

TEACHERS' UNIONS, school boards and other critics do not like charter schools. They have a number of tactics for opposing them, chief among which is to dismiss them as private schools. Here is how the Canadian Teachers' Federation does it in its recent National Issues Campaign. Criticizing different kinds of schools, the document discusses "Privatization, including charter schools, private schools, vouchers."

Charter schools, however, are not private schools and the campaign was intentionally designed to be misleading in that regard. Let us deal with this at the outset. Just what makes a school private rather than public? In the end, does it not boil down to being able to select (or exclude) students, charge tuition fees and frame a school within a religious or sectarian point of view? But charter schools:

- must be legally authorized by government just like other public schools;
- use pooled public funds and spend the same per pupil as regular public schools;
- cannot charge tuition, must be nonsectarian, and may not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or ability; must satisfy the government with their curriculum and

- educational results;
- must be fully accountable for managing the public funds they receive.

In short, charter schools are public schools and the critics know it. That is precisely why they find the concept so threatening.

Public Education: A System in Gridlock

SCHOOL BOARDS are not working as well as they used to. The signs are obvious. Private school enrollment continues to expand, home schooling is a growth industry, and across the country, parents are increasing their pressure for traditional model schools and for more responsiveness from their boards. A recent major editorial in the *Globe and Mail*, "Who needs school boards?" (22 January 1994), openly called for the abolition of school boards and made a solid case for doing so. New Brunswick has done just that, abolishing its school boards and replacing them with a system of parent councils.

The issue of the day is governance: How best can we govern our public schools? Canada has had a top-down command system of school board control, and it worked well in simpler times when our communities were more homogeneous and there was broad agreement on expectations and values. However the "one size fits all" common school that has evolved under bureaucratic rulers no longer satisfies many Canadian parents and teachers. They object to the lower common denominator expectations that result and are positively enraged or depressed by the highhanded autocratic decision-making of remote bureaucrats in central offices.

Nowhere is this better laid out than in the recently published *Busting Bureaucracy to Reclaim Our Schools*. Short, easily read, and written for Canadians, the book is highly recommended for those in Atlantic Canada who wish to understand the wisdom and policy advantages of choice and chartering. Nothing like it has been published elsewhere in North America.

Busting Bureaucracy is significant for two other reasons. First, public debate on chartering in Canada instantly gained great legitimacy because the monograph was commissioned by one of our nation's most prestigious public policy research institutes, the Institute for Research on Public Policy in Montreal. Among all the possible reform options for Canadian public education, it is highly significant that charter schools were specifically chosen for in-depth analysis. Secondly, the author chosen for the analysis is one of Canada's most respected education policy analysts. Stephen B. Lawton is Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Administration at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), in Toronto.

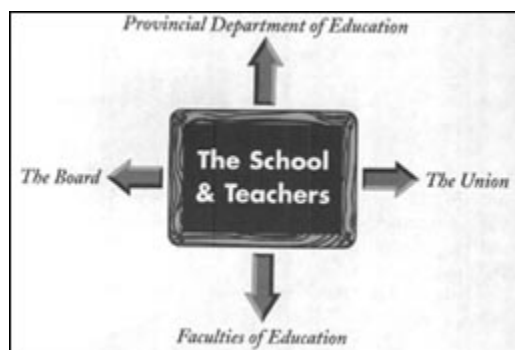
Lawton begins by reviewing an 1848 contract between teacher Miss Martha Leatherbury and a group of nine farmers in Pleasant Township, Ontario. He notes the simplicity and directness of the contract between these parties and its clear sense of accountability. The parents hired the teacher and there was no question who served whom. He then makes a contrast "with our present situation, in which it is difficult to determine who has contracted with whom, under what terms, and how any party can be held accountable" (Lawton, 1995). He notes that this "bureaucratic nightmare" has taken over a century to develop and then goes on to briefly outline what has happened.

Lawton briefly lays out for the reader the sequence of events which over the past 150 years have led to our "bureaucratic bondage." Each piece of legislation led slowly but surely to our

present situation in which huge school boards operate schools for government, teachers' associations have gained enormous power, and school inspection has been made ever more toothless. The end result, notes Lawton, is that, "In effect, school boards now contract with labor unions, rather than individual teachers, and members of the union are not accountable for their own performance" (Lawton, 1995). Overall, the net effect of this history has been a complete reversal of the direct accountability in Miss Leatherbury's 1848 contract. As Lawton notes, "The rotation of staff, administrator's loyalty to the central office, and teachers' protection by their unions mean that parents and communities have essentially no say as to whom their children's teachers are" (Lawton, 1995).

There were reasons for each step taken along those 150 years, and they were probably good reasons at the time. However, the result is that by '97, public education in Canada has become a coercive monopoly that is expensive and incredibly complex. It functions poorly, and in the process, frustrates and stresses teachers and alienates many parents.

The entire system is now in gridlock. Four powerful special interest groups have come to dominate the system, marginalizing teachers and parents. The interests and rights of these four education "superpowers" constantly tug at schools and their teachers (see diagram below). Worse, they do not pull in the same direction. In fact, the union and the board are often directly at odds. The province usually has goals for what might be expected in the way of outcomes and methods for assessing them. Faculties of education, however, harbor many professors who are diametrically opposed to standardized assessment and lack any semblance of agreement about the goals of education and what outcomes (if any) might reasonably be expected. The result is an atmosphere of reduced expectations and a hostility towards testing that are noticeably different than that prevailing in many other countries. Contributing to the gridlock, many teachers adopt such attitudes during their exposure to the faculties and bring them to their schools and classrooms. This is what it all looks like schematically:



This gridlock has enormous consequences for those (e.g., Atlantic Canada's legislators) who would reform the system. As Chubb and Moe put it:

In general, the various components of the existing system are so strongly interconnected that any attempt to change one component in isolation will set off a series of compensating adjustments among all the others, mitigating the impact of the reform (Chubb and Moe, 1990).