

PERSPECTIVE

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How to have school choice and a happy teachers union

Increasing numbers of students and parents are abandoning the public schools whenever they have the chance.

Private-schools' market share is growing in most major urban markets, and voucher schemes are justified as a way to give poor and minority parents the type of educational choice that previously was only the privilege of the affluent.

The successful reforms accomplished by the public-education system in the Canadian city of Edmonton show that school choice can work for families from all backgrounds. The change has been so dramatic that even public schools in Edmonton (a city of nearly 1 million people in Alberta) are winning market share. In fact, several successful former private schools have even been welcomed into the public system.

The culture of Edmonton's schools focuses relentlessly on the educational achievement of its students, earning it recent recognition by UCLA Management Professor William Ouchi as one of North America's top school districts. Even the powerful teachers union has become an advocate of Edmonton's model.

Three elements have been vital to Edmonton's success.

Powerful schools with individual educational missions

Each school has its own explicit academic focus, and new schools are founded at public expense when enough parents band together to back an educational philosophy. Private schools have joined the public system because they could pursue their educational mission with integrity while using the tax base.

More than 90 percent of the public dollars spent on Edmonton's schools are given directly to schools to manage. The schools may buy support services from the school board, or are equally free to buy from outside suppliers if they think this provides better value for students and staff.

When the school board stopped paying for electricity centrally and gave the money to individual schools, usage fell dramatically. By allowing schools to keep the extra money they saved through conservation, the school board sent a powerful message: Autonomy is genuine and good management will be rewarded, not punished.

Universal school choice

Every spring, each child in the Edmonton public schools is given a "passport," entitling them and their parents to visit any school in the city.

They are free to enroll at any school the following year, if space is available. About half of Edmonton's students currently attend school outside their neighbourhood. To keep transportation

By Angus McBeath

Summary

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One Canadian school district's reforms have been so impressive that even private schools are turning public and the teachers union proudly boasts of being a partner in the process.

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Parents, students and teachers who despair of bringing a focus on educational achievement and accountability back into the public schools should know that real reform is possible.

costs low, students are given public-transit passes and are responsible for getting themselves to school.

Crucially, the money follows the student. Successful schools are thus automatically rewarded with new resources.

Schools failing their students stand out like a sore thumb, and attract a range of interventions from the school board focused on supporting improved performance,

not punishment. But schools that fail their students consistently are closed – not just in theory, but in reality.

Data-driven accountability

Finally, a staggering amount of useful data is meticulously gathered and skilfully

used to ensure effective use of resources to achieve good educational results.

There are not merely good quality standardized exams, but also extensive data on the socio-economic status of each school's population, retention and graduation rates, and the level at which each student reads.

Rather than remaining a state secret, these data are widely available to the point that if you phone the Edmonton School Board office and are put on hold, you are treated to the latest data about school performance rather than canned music.

Each school is informed of what the data says about its performance on a wide variety of measures. And the readily available data makes those passport-carrying students and their parents highly informed and powerful consumers.

The approach is so successful that even the recently retired president of the teachers union proudly proclaims paternity of the system. This is a lot different than what happened in 1978, when the union struck – not over the usual points of contention like money, pensions and work practices – but rather over a sense of powerlessness about what was happening in their schools.

The union actually became part of the drive for more powerful schools and accepted stringent accountability in return. And it doesn't hurt that those private schools now joining the public system are bringing their teachers – and dues – into the union fold.

A lot of work remains to be done in Edmonton. Test scores, the performance of minority kids and graduation rates need to continue to improve. But Edmonton has the information, tools and commitment to carry out the kind of continuous improvement that will produce these better results.

Parents, students and teachers who despair of bringing a focus on educational achievement and accountability back into the public schools should know that real reform is possible. We did it in Edmonton, and no one in the system today – not parents, students or teachers – has any desire to go back to the old low-performance model that predominates virtually everywhere else.

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