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Why are Ontario parents leaving the public school system?

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On May 6, 2010, the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada released a paper on education in Ontario, revealing data showing that public school enrolment is decreasing and independent school enrolment is increasing. The paper further highlights that in spite of declining enrolment, funding for public schools is increasing.

The purpose of that paper was to show the hard numbers, and highlight that the Ontario education system is not adapting to the desires of Ontario parents who are choosing alternatives to the public system. The question remains: Why are Ontario parents leaving the public school system?

For many parents, a decline in academic quality is the motivation. The Society for Quality Education, an Ontario-based group that tracks education trends and quality, notes that Ontario students fare poorly in contrast with other provinces. "In most comparisons of student achievement over the past 25 years," they write, "Ontario students have performed poorly relative to students in Alberta, BC, and Quebec." [1] And an Ontario government organization, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, finds likewise that Ontario education outcomes aren't improving commensurate with funding levels. For example, the percentage of grade four students achieving international academic benchmarks in mathematics showed no more than a one percent improvement between 2003 and 2007. [2] In that same time period, grade eight student percentages showed no improvement and even slight decreases in the percentage achieving the highest benchmark. [3]

Quality (or lack thereof) is one of the main reasons parents choose to educate their children outside the public system writes the Fraser Institute, a Vancouver-based think tank that ranks schools across the country. They surveyed 919 Ontario households where parents were educating their children in independent schools. In this study, over 70 per cent of parents surveyed stated that the dedication of teachers was an important factor in their decision. [4] 66 per cent cited academic quality. [5] Other desirable characteristics of independent schools were factors, such as "...no danger of teachers going on strike", "educates the whole child", "is conducive to character development" and "is a safe school." [6] In addition to this, parents with children in schools with a religious foundation also responded that their child's school "reinforces our religion" and "supports our family's values."

The enrolment facts

Enrolment in Ontario's elementary public (including Roman Catholic) schools is declining and yet funding levels are skyrocketing. At the same time, enrolment in independent schools in Ontario is increasing. Thus, parents of independent school students pay once for the school their kids attend and again for the public school they don't.

Between 2000 and 2005, independent school enrolment increased by 8.8 per cent. [7]

Between 2000 and 2005 Ontario public schools saw an enrolment decrease of 1.1 per cent. [8]
Between 2008 and 2013, projections show another 3.8 per cent decrease. [9]

From 2002-3 to 2009-10 public (elementary and secondary) school funding increased from \$14.4 billion to a government estimated \$19.5 billion, a 36 per cent increase. [10]

Ontario Ministry of Education numbers state that independent elementary and secondary school enrollment in 2005 was 119,584. [11] Statistics Canada states that the average expenditure per public school student in Ontario in 2004 was \$9,200. [12] In 2005 alone, independent schools should have saved the Ontario Ministry of Education over a billion dollars, \$1,100,172,800, to be exact. [13] Yet, in Ontario, there is no government funding for independent schools.

Recommendations

Alberta and British Columbia already offer partial funding of schools outside the public system, there is evidence in Calgary that charter schools there have improved the public system, as their innovations are being adopted by the local public school board. [14] Insofar as independent schools quite often learn to do more with less, the Ontario public school system could definitely benefit from their expertise in austerity. In these provinces, parental choice is part and parcel of the education system.

Ontario parents who choose to educate their children outside the public and Roman Catholic systems pay twice. To adapt to the educational desires of parents, Ontario should follow the example of Alberta or British Columbia and provide partial relief these parents by providing partial funding to the schools their children attend.

The Ontario Ministry of Education needs to adapt to the changing desires of Ontario parents. Simply increasing public school funding is not the answer.

Endnotes

[1] Society for Quality Education. (2010). What we believe: The evidence that Ontario students are not learning enough. Retrieved May 14, 2010 from <http://www.societyforqualityeducation.org/index.php/about/category/C13/>

[2] Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2010). Trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) 2007: Ontario Results Report. p. 12 Retrieved May 14, 2010 at http://www.eqao.com/pdf_e/08/TIMSS_Ontario_Report_2007.pdf

The Education Quality and Accountability Office “provides parents, teachers and the public with accurate and reliable information about student achievement. EQAO also makes recommendations for improvement that educators, parents, policy-makers and others in the education community can use to improve learning and teaching.”

See <http://www.eqao.com/AboutEQAO/AboutEQAO.aspx?status=logout&Lang=E>

[3] *Ibid*, p. 13

[4] Van Pelt, D., Allison, P. A. and Allison, D. J. (2007). Ontario private schools: Who chooses them and why? Toronto: The Fraser Institute, p. 23. Retrieved May 19, 2010 from http://www.fraserinstitute.org/commerce.web/product_files/OntariosPrivateSchools.pdf

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Neibert, B. (2006). How and why selected CIS schools were founded: 1960 to present. London: A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Western Ontario. With calculations by author. Mr. Niebert’s numbers are taken from Ontario Ministry of Education statistics. Numbers for 2001 to 2005 are publicly available at

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/quickfacts/2005-06/quickFacts05_06.pdf

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] Declining Enrolment Working Group. (2009). Planning and possibilities: The report of the declining enrolment group. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, p. 4. Retrieved May 19, 2010 from

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/DEWG.pdf>

[10] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2010). Education Funding. Information from 2002-03 to 2009-10 is available at <http://edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/>

This information is updated from the information found in the original paper, due to new information coming to light after the date of publication.

[11] Ontario Ministry of Education. (2008). Quick facts: Ontario schools 2005-2006. Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, p. 10. Retrieved May 19, 2010 from

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/quickfacts/2005-06/quickFacts05_06.pdf

[12] Blouin, P. and Courchesne, M-J. (2007). Summary public school indicators for the provinces and Territories, 1998-1999 to 2004-2005. Ottawa: Statistics Canada Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics Division, pg. 15. Retrieved May 19, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/81-595-m/81-595-m2007050-eng.pdf>

[13] Author’s calculations.

[14] Charter Schools: Alberta’s Best Kept Secret. (2007). A documentary hosted by educator Andrew Nikiforuk showcases three charter schools in Calgary.