

Ontario's school boards need more competition, not less

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Kitchener Record - (Apr 24, 2007)

In the April 11 story, *School Boards Urged To Support One System*, The Record reports that several Ontario school boards are calling for a single school system across the province. This seems like a good idea on first look, but closer examination reveals a serious flaw.

In Waterloo Region, most non-Catholic parents have no choice but to send their children to the neighbourhood school assigned by their school board, while most Catholic parents can choose between two schools.

If Ontario had a single school system, the Waterloo District School Board would have a monopoly on schooling in our area, and fewer parents would have the power to choose their children's schools.

It's an odd thing. Most people understand that competition is good when it comes to businesses, and even quasi-governmental institutions like the post office or the LCBO. Everyone knows that monopolies are unresponsive, inefficient and expensive. We like the competition among grocery stores, car dealerships, dentists, manufacturers, and so forth, because it means we get excellent service in these sectors.

However, for some reason, most people think that, even though it's bad to have a monopoly if you're providing computer software or banking services, it's OK to have a monopoly if you're providing education services. But there isn't really any reason to think that the education sector is exempt from the forces that apply to the other sectors of the economy.

An education monopoly behaves just like any other monopoly. In an education monopoly, public schools have a guaranteed stream of students and the funding that they generate. It doesn't matter whether a school is doing a good job or a poor job -- all schools receive the same amount of money regardless of their level of service. Even schools that are doing a horrible job can and do continue to shortchange their students indefinitely. They can do this because they have a monopoly.

However, things can change dramatically when competition is introduced into the education sector. Other countries, like the Netherlands and Sweden, have more competition than Ontario, and their student achievement is better. Even within Canada, there are differences in the amount of educational competition.

Back in the late '80s and then again in the mid-'90s, Alberta introduced legislation designed to increase the amount of education competition. At first, the Calgary school board chose to turn its back on the changed educational landscape and tried to carry on with business as usual.

As a result, Calgary parents started withdrawing their children from the public schools and sending them to the various alternatives that had now become available. In spite of the fact that the city was growing, the Calgary school board began to hemorrhage students and was forced to close one school after the other.

Finally, the situation got so bad that the Calgary school board did a complete about-face and introduced dramatic improvements, creating new schools to compete with the rival schools. Not surprisingly, many of its newly created schools resembled the competition.

For example, to compete with a rival all-girls school, the Calgary public board started up an all-girls school of its own. The board also started a special science school similar to one that was siphoning off a lot of its students and fully five schools that used the very popular traditional approach used at the competing Foundations for the Future Charter School. These days, no surprise, the Calgary board is boasting that its enrolment is climbing.

Alberta offers more school choice than any other province, and Alberta students outperform the rest of Canada by a wide margin on comparisons of student achievement. B.C. and Quebec have less educational competition than Alberta, but more than the remaining provinces -- and their students tend to come second and third after Alberta. The Atlantic provinces have the least amount of educational competition in Canada, and their students tend to do the worst of all.

If Ontario were to switch to a single school system, the amount of competition among schools would be reduced. Such a policy would move Ontario closer to the Atlantic provinces in terms of the amount of school choice. The likely result would be a drop in student achievement.

Ontario needs more competition among schools, not less.

Malkin Dare is a resident of Waterloo and president of the Society for Quality Education, a Toronto-based organization dedicated to promoting school choice in order to improve student learning. Second Opinion articles reflect the views of Record readers on a variety of subjects.