



Parents For Educational Choice – a growing network of parents and supporters for broad choices in education in Ontario

Premise – Government Supported Parental Choice in Education in the Province of Ontario Is The Most Efficient Use of Tax Dollars (Fiscal Responsibility)

Submission to Ontario Government Pre-budget Consultation
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Introduction

Parents For Educational Choice is a growing group of parents and supporters of children who attend any number of the 879 independent schools in the province of Ontario (Ministry of Education – 2006) and who believe that parents should be fully empowered to choose the best type of education for their children without financial penalty. The current situation in Ontario sees parents of independent school children and home-schooled children happily paying their full share of taxes as well as tuitions or curriculum costs for the education of their choice.

For the past 30 years and under all 3 political parties in Ontario, the Ministry of Education has tinkered with a variety of reforms to public education including alternative programs, smaller classes, standardized testing and higher salaries for staff, all in an effort to improve the results of the public education system. Like their Canadian and American colleagues, Ontario continues to spend a lot more on public education since 1970 (85% more – *Caroline Hoxby, Harvard economist*) and yet the improved quality of public education is marginal at best. Education spending continues to increase because there seems to be a sense that spending more money must bring about improvement and greater results. Seeing the same problems and challenges persist despite the increased spending is not making the public feel more satisfied with public education in Ontario. (*Leger Marketing – Back to School Polls 2002 – 2006*).

However, when parents are truly free (without financial penalty) to choose the type of education that they believe is best for their children, **parental satisfaction, student achievement and schools' overall academic performances** increase in all schools, public and private (*Canadians and School Choice Options –Reginald Bibby, 1999 & Education Next - Hoxby, 2001*). Studies show that all schools perform better in jurisdictions where there is vigorous competition amongst public and private schools. Areas with many low-cost independent school choices score near 3 national percentile points higher in 8th grade reading and math, and near 4 percentile points higher in 12th grade reading and math. Parents of children in independent schools express higher levels of satisfaction in these 3 key areas than parents of children in Catholic schools and parents of public school children coming in last place.

Rather than continuing to increase public education budgets annually, tinkering with public education alone and seeing minimal advancements in parental satisfaction, student achievement and school performance, a growing number of agencies and thinktanks (*Organization For Quality Education, Society For Quality Education, The Fraser Institute, The Society For The Advancement of Excellence in Education*) support the notion that providing government supported school choice is the best solution to bringing about the government's and the public's desired results for public education in Ontario.

Guiding Principles

The current government of Ontario has stated that restoring the public's faith in public education is one of its top priorities as it approaches tabling the next provincial budget and the next provincial election. It is the desire of *Parents for Educational Choice* to see public education improve **and** see government supported choice for other types of schools. PEC believes that every child in Ontario deserves to a high quality education regardless of the school school each one attends. PEC has been compelled by the evidenciary support for the idea that public education improves when government supports broad school choice. PEC submits the following guiding principles that will hopefully assist the government in developing policy that really will improve education in the province of Ontario – excellence for all.

#1 - Parental responsibility for the education of their children

Parents have the primary responsibility for the education of their children and should have a corresponding right to freely choose the type of education they desire for their children. This is affirmed in the UN Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of which Canada is a signatory (*Section 26 - United Nations ICCPR, 1999*). Further, a growing number of parents and non-parents (the public) believe that parents deserve that right (90%) and that government should support some funding for those decisions (53%) (*Canadians and School Options - Bibby 1999*)

#2 - Overall parental satisfaction and student achievement improve where government supports broad choice.

Choice influences both public and independent schools in a positive manner. If every school were to face a greater level of competition both from other districts and from independent schools, the productivity, in terms of students' levels of learning at a given level of spending, would be 28% higher than it is now (*Hoxby, 2001 - Harvard economist*). In the U.S. and in New Zealand, researchers have measured the effects of government supported school choice on student learning and parental satisfaction. In both countries, evidence suggests that choice has a statistically significant impact on both. In the U.S., New Zealand, Denmark, and Sweden, government supported school choice is responsible for a wide range of benefits: greater responsiveness of schools to parental concerns, greater awareness of educational issues, and a more dynamic, innovative and equitable education system (*The Fraser Institute – The Case for School Choice, 1999*). Parents in Ontario seem to share the belief in this idea of parental satisfaction being linked with government supported school choice (52% believe that all schools would improve if parents could freely choose the school for their child – *Ipsos-Reid – September 2003 & 2006*).

#3 - Government supported School Choice would be good for all schools in Ontario

5 other Canadian provinces have models to provide for government supported school choice through per student grants ranging anywhere from 40% to 61% of the public school operating cost per pupil (*Canadian Education Freedom Index – Fraser Institute, 2003*). In those jurisdictions, government supported school choice brings about academic improvement and greater overall fiscal responsibility in all schools largely due to some healthy marketplace competition. Interestingly, 90% of children in those jurisdictions attend public

schools while up to 10% attend independent schools, charter schools, alternative programs, or home-schools (*Federation of Independent Schools, Canada – 2000*) (*Hoxby – Harvard economist - Kiel Institute, 2001 – conducted the largest study of educational efficiency made to date*). Bodies of evidence suggest that if Ontario supported broader parental choice in education, desired outcomes in all schools would increase. This would meet the current government's number one priority for public education reform in the most fiscally responsible way.

#4 - Government should support something that is good for all children in Ontario (shared responsibility of government for education)

If a group of parents wants a certain type of education and can demonstrate that this can be done responsibly, then governments should make legal and financial provisions for such schooling. Public frustration with the education system has been building for a generation, but the educational establishment has yet to propose a viable solution to the problem. International evidence suggests that government supported choice in education offers the most plausible answer. If government rejects this solution, it seems probable that Ontario's education will continue to cost more and yield less. Ontario is a province that prides itself on tolerance and celebration of diversity, with the hallmark of freedom that comes from freely making choices. It is ironic and indeed, counter-intuitive, to have see tolerance of other school choices be squashed out by public education special interest groups when school choice is a proven contributor to public good in other jurisdictions. The public has already indicated its acceptance for government supported school choice once by endorsing *The Equity in Education Tax Credit (COMPAS - Education Funding – National Post, June 2001)* (*Ipsos-Reid – September 2003*)

Conclusion

PEC supports the current government's major priority to improving public education. But the case is clear. Policies that promote or guarantee educational freedom would offer both short-term relief for the significant minority of parents who are frustrated with public education or cannot make use of public education for religious, cultural or pedagogical reasons, and have the greatest chance of success in improving the province's entire education system. Policy makers who turn a blind eye to the growing body of evidence will have to explain to future generations of Ontarians why this province failed its children while the rest of the world was embracing school choice.

Recommendation

The current government of Ontario in tabling its next budget should take a step towards fairness and true educational reform by providing government supported school choice. This will help Ontario fulfill international obligations and remove the human rights discrepancy currently on record with the U.N. It will provide the necessary and sweeping educational reform that this government has been promising for 3 years. It will bring about a more just public policy on education which includes all children and satisfies a government requirement to provide for the education of all children. Finally, it is the most proven method (in other jurisdictions) restoring fiscal responsibility in education while not compromising the provision of important educational services.