

**Parents For Educational Choice** – a growing network of parents and supporters of independent schools in Ontario

**Parental Choice in Education in the province of Ontario as a Method to attain Fiscal Responsibility For All Education**  
Submission to Ontario Government Pre-budget Consultation

March 2004

**Introduction**

*Parents For Educational Choice* is a growing group of parents whose children attend any number of the 828 independent schools in the province of Ontario (Ministry of Education – 2004) who believe that parents should be empowered to choose the best type of education for their children without financial penalty. The current situation in Ontario has these parents paying their full share of taxes and a full tuition for the school of their choice.

Over the past 30 years, Ontario's Ministries of Education have tinkered with a variety of reforms in public education including alternative programs, smaller classes and higher salaries for staff, all in an effort to improve the public education system. Like their Canadian and American colleagues, they are spending a lot more on education since 1970 (85% - *Hoxby, Harvard economist*) and yet the quality of education has stayed about the same, maybe a little bit better. Education spending continues to increase because people want education that shows regular incremental improvement over time. Having it stay the same or get only a little better is not making people happy (*Leger Marketing – Back to School Polls 2002, 2003*).

When parents are truly free to choose the education that is best for their children without financial penalty, **parental satisfaction, student achievement and schools' overall academic performances** increase in all schools, public and private. (*Canadians and School Choice Options - Bibby, 1999 & Education Next - Hoxby, 2001*) These studies show that all schools perform better in jurisdictions where there is vigorous competition among public and private schools. Areas with many low-cost independent school

choices score near 3 national percentile points higher in 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math, and near 4 percentile points higher in 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math. Parents of private school children, followed by those in Catholic schools and other public schools coming last express higher levels of satisfaction.

Rather than continue tinkering with public education alone, a growing number of agencies (*Organization For Quality Education, Society For Quality Education, Fraser Institute, Society For The Advancement of Excellence in Education*) and a growing body of evidence support the notion that providing real school choice would bring about the government's and the public's desired results for public education in Ontario.

### **Guiding Principles**

The government of Ontario is currently considering methods of improving public education in Ontario as it approaches tabling the next provincial budget. It is the desire of *Parents for Educational Choice* to see public education improve **and** see school choice happen. We believe in a quality education for every child in Ontario regardless of the school each attends. We see support for the idea that the best way to improve public education is to implement government support for school choice. We submit the following guiding principles that we trust will assist you in developing policy to improve all education in the province of Ontario.

#### *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 be able to 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*)

#### *Overall parental satisfaction and student achievement improve when there is support for choice*

Choice influences public and private schools in a positive manner. If every

school were to face a high 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 school choice on student learning and parental satisfaction. In both countries, evidence suggests that it has a statistically significant impact on both. In the U.S., New Zealand, Denmark, and Sweden, 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 (*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 school choice (52% believe that all schools would improve if parents could freely choose the school for their child - *Ipsos-Reid - September 2003*).

*Government supported School Choice would be good for all schools in Ontario*  
5 other Canadian provinces have formulae 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, supported school choice has seen academic improvement and greater fiscal responsibility in all schools due to some healthy marketplace competition. 90% of children in those jurisdictions stay in the public schools while up to 10% attend independent schools, charter schools, or alternative programs (*Federation of Independent Schools, Canada - 2000*) (*Hoxby - Harvard economist - Kiel Institute, 2001 - conducted the largest study of educational efficiency made to date*). Evidence suggests that if Ontario supported greater parental choice in education, student achievement would improve. This would meet the current government's number one priority for public education reform in the most fiscally responsible way.

*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 having choices. It is ironic and indeed, counter-productive, to have calls for this tolerance of other school choices be squashed out by teacher's unions and other public education special interest groups when school choice is a proven contributor to public good in other jurisdictions. The public indicated its desire for government to support school choice for the public good upon the advent of the *Equity in Education Tax Credit* (COMPAS - Education Funding - National Post, June 2001) (Ipsos-Reid - September 2003)

### **Conclusion**

We support the government's priority in 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 frustrated with the system or cannot make use of the system for religious, cultural or pedagogical reasons, and provide impetus to improve the province's entire education system in the long-term. Policy makers who turn a blind eye to the evidence will have to explain to future generations of Ontarians why their province failed its children when 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. It will fulfill international obligations, provide necessary, sweeping educational reform, implement fairer public policy on education in this province and most importantly it is the most proven method of restoring fiscal responsibility while not compromising provision of services.