

There's A Reason It Isn't Easy To Argue Against School Choice...

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It must be an election year because educational improvement is always a hot election issues and the politicians and journalists are now trudging out all the old fear-mongering misperceptions and partial research findings in an effort to convince us that any kind of government supported school choice will destroy public education and society as we know it.

Both The Toronto Star (Saving Public Education: Too Many Choices – 03-25-11) and The Toronto Sun (Breaking Up Our School System – 03-19-11) have published recent articles about school board's growing pressure to increase the program choices for parents when it comes to educating their children in an effort to keep families "bound" to a school system.

Never mind the fact that both of these articles completely ignored the most recent, relevant and informative research reports in Ontario specifically on the subject of just who is choosing alternative education and why. *"Ontario's Private Schools – Who Chooses Them & Why?" – May 2007 – University of Western Ontario* and *"Public Education and Parental Choice" – May 2010 – Institute of Marriage & Family Canada* both statistically support the idea that while parents choosing private schools for their kids tend on average to be better educated, employed in higher status occupations and display more indicators of civic participation than public school parents, they also both conclude that parents from ALL INCOME, OCCUPATIONAL, AND EDUCATIONAL groups send their kids to private schools in Ontario and find value in the education offered.

What's more interesting is that the first study also found that there are several parallels between current desirable private school characteristics identified by parents and public school characteristics, gleaned from earlier research, appreciated by public school parents during the 70's and 80's. In other words, parents generally yearn for a time gone by when public schools were strong on things like leadership, clear goals, parent/teacher collaboration, flexibility, responsiveness, high expectations, good discipline and school safety rather than settling for a watered down effort to offer "one-size-fits-all" education.

There is some very real pressure here. Declining birth rates and declining enrolment has public schools concerned about how to support education budgets that have increased from 9.4 billion to 13.8 billion between 2002 and 2010 (that's a 47% increase) when there are less and less students in the system. The *Declining Enrolment Working Group* was established in May 2008 to address this crisis, younger and younger children are being pushed into all-day kindergarten and the Pascal plan of early learning (*With Our Best Future In Mind – Charles Pascal – June 2009*), more and more alternative programs are being offered in public schools in big urban centres, and finally, portraying competitive independent schools as havens for the wealthy only where social cohesion is lost.

But a careful read of this research demonstrates that parents of all sizes, shapes, colours and socio-economic backgrounds, want more choices for a variety of reasons. Successful government supported school choice already happens in 5 other Canadian provinces (with BC and Alberta in the lead), 37 American states with a variety of school choice mechanisms and more than half the countries in the western world, including Sweden which has more government supported school choice than anywhere else in the world and is right next door to Finland which boasts one of the strongest public education systems in the world!

The old criticisms have been researched and found wanting. Social cohesion does not break down in local communities when kids go to different schools and programs. If it were true, we'd already see evidence of it since the number of kids attending independent schools is still on the rise in Ontario (8.8% between 2002 and 2010) even without government support. And these reports support the notion that private and public school families are equally involved in civic, cultural, sports & hobbies in their local communities, meaning that public school families and private school families are equally involved in their local neighbourhoods without any reports of social unrest!

Supporting choice will not remove pressure from "the system" to improve for all kids by giving into the demands of certain insistent groups. In fact, the only thing that takes pressure off any system to grow and improve is by allowing it to become a monopoly which naturally disallows any real competition. Competition as a market-based indicator is a powerful regulator and motivator in providing excellence in ALL schools, public or private.

It has never been true that the only real choice for most families is the local public school, but the government certainly wants us to believe that and live in fear of a phantom mass exodus of the best students, teachers and principals from public schools to independent schools and alternative programs. In fact, in all other jurisdictions where government supports greater educational choice, 90% of kids stick with public schools anyways.

Great American statesman John Dewey may have said private schools have a social spirit but not one that extends to the real world and so we risk raising narrow minded kids by cloistering them in special programs and schools, but another great statesman named John Stuart Mill said that "a general state education is a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another – and as the mold pleases the dominant power in the government, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind leading by a natural tendency to one over the body." In other words, he understood that government schools have an agenda and that such schools should be "only one choice among many." Freedom of opportunity and diversity are always better for democracy than entitlement and conformity.