

Back to Star Investigation: Cash for marks gets kids into university



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Robert Cribb

Underachieving Ontario high school students are beating out more academically deserving teens for university spots and lucrative scholarships with inflated grades purchased from privately run, for-profit schools.

Lax oversight of what many Ontario educators call an expanding “credit mill” industry is creating an unlevel playing field that rewards financial means over ability and hard work, a joint Toronto Star/Ryerson School of Journalism investigation has found.

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Provincial inspection reports obtained through freedom of information requests and interviews with students, teachers and principals, reveal:

Grades at some private schools arbitrarily increased upon request

Credits granted with less than half of mandatory class hours completed

Outdated curriculums, no lesson plans, no course outlines and missing student assessments

Difficult questions removed from exams



George Benedek, a former Toronto public high school principal (seen here at his Newmarket home), says kids who attend some for-profit private schools are getting scholarships based on false documents.

AARON HARRIS/FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Teachers without proper qualifications and those who “do not understand” evaluation and assessment

Students permitted to take courses without the mandatory prerequisites

Rewriting of tests for \$100

Students left to write tests with little supervision and access to the Internet.

“There are kids who would be failing but are instead getting 80s in these schools,” says George Benedek, principal of Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute in Toronto until he retired in June after 33 years in the public school system.

“There are kids getting scholarships based on false documents. They take (university) spots they shouldn’t be getting and then flunk out because they’re not ready. It’s undermining the integrity of education.”

Pressured by the increasingly strict academic requirements of university admission, grade-challenged teens and their parents are paying hundreds of dollars per credit from private schools to replace lower high school marks.

The validity of those private school grades — widely viewed by principals, teachers and guidance counsellors to be 20 to 30 per cent higher than those earned in regular high schools — are a matter of suspicion and concern.

Private school operators interviewed by the *Star* say the higher grades they hand out can be explained by smaller class sizes and more personal attention.

“We do work more with our students and I think students work harder at private schools as well because they’ve paid for it,” says Tariq Butt, principal of a private high school in Toronto which was shut down by the province last year.

The financial transaction involved in private school credits can also make teachers more sympathetic

to their students, he says.

“I might, without wanting to, award them slightly higher grades. That is part of the equation . . . This is true across the board, even at schools that I work with.”

The number of private schools in Ontario has exploded in recent years, from 160 in 1995 to more than 358 credit-granting private schools today. About half of those are in Toronto.

About 24,000 students earned more than 150,000 credits at private schools in the 2008/09 school year alone, the last year for which ministry data exists.

Those figures include students attending prestigious private schools such as Upper Canada College and Havergal College.

Twenty-eight ministry inspectors from across the province visit the province’s private schools at least every two years.

Since 2006, they revoked the licences of eight private high schools.

Even when that happens, school operators are often permitted to reopen under different names.

Three of the four schools’ operators who were shut down by the ministry last year are still involved in credit-granting private schools, the investigation found. The fourth continues to operate a private career college for adults.

Two years ago , the provincial Ministry of Education attempted to address private school grade inflation by placing a “P” designation (representing a “private” school credit) on a public school transcript to alert university administrators of marks obtained outside a student’s normal high school.

But the “P” designation has only prompted greater confusion among university officials unsure of how to distinguish private school grades between legitimate private schools such as Upper Canada College and unscrupulous strip mall operations from regular high school marks.

“We sort of take the approach of a grade is a grade is a grade,” says Wilfrid Laurier University registrar Ray Darling, who admits he's heard of credit mills selling grades to prospective students.

“We're not happy about it at universities. But we can't go on witch-hunts either,” he says.

Other university admissions directors interviewed agree.

“As long as the ministry's approved them I take the grades as they are. That's the ministry's job to verify the schools,” says Janice O'Farrell, director of admissions at Carleton University.

The University of Waterloo disregards the “P” notation, says registrar Ken Lavigne. It does, however, require students applying to competitive math and engineering programs fill out a form detailing their private school course history if they repeated credits outside of their home public school, he said.

“Frankly, (the “P” designation) didn't achieve what we thought it would,” Lavigne says.

Leona Dombrowsky, the province's Minister of Education, said the “P” introduced by her government brought greater transparency to private school credits.

Presented with the Star's findings, she said she's open to exploring changes that could bring greater clarity to grades from private schools.

“Absolutely, I think it's only in the interest of the students to ensure that information that's transferred is clear and accurate,” she said in an interview.

“I will speak with my colleague, the minister of Training, Colleges and Universities. It's certainly worth having a conversation about if there's a way we can assist post secondary institutions to better understand and appreciate information that's coming to them. I'm very prepared to do that.”

Dombrowsky said her government has focused on building a strong public school system that is among the “best in the world.”

The province's alternative private school industry is the product of "consumer demand," she said.

"This is the school system that the Tories wanted to direct taxpayer dollars into," she said. "We do need to be sure if we're granting credits that they are . . . complying with the standards and requirements of the ministry of education."

There's little confidence among educators that's happening.

Peggy Aitchison, principal of Forest Hill Collegiate which has the highest percentage of part-time students in Toronto, says some private schools where her students attend consistently award grades in the 90s.

"(That) isn't the norm in the range of marks that generally come from a class. I can't account for it. Teaching methods and class size aren't the sole determinant," she says. "The choice for students is, 'If everybody else in this league is using steroids then how can I possibly compete unless I too use steroids?'"

Unconventional education methods at some private schools may contribute to the inflated grade explanation.

Beacon House International, a private school with three locations in the GTA, allows students to rewrite tests for \$100.

"The purpose was to make them (students) understand that if they don't try, if they're casual about it, if they don't do well the first time, there are going to be consequences," says Bilal Rashid, principal of the school, adding that the \$100 rewrites are rare and require the student to provide a "legitimate reason."

Another school policy allowing students to postpone scheduled tests upon request is designed to offer flexibility to teens with busy schedules, he says.

"There is an advantage to this, I'm not suggesting there isn't," says Rashid, who counters by saying his schools have provided a valuable alternative for students with learning disabilities.

Beacon House has been the subject of three complaints — one from a public school board, one from another private school and a third source listed as “anonymous” — investigated by the ministry since 2009 for “selling marks,” “improper assessment and “changed marks,” according to ministry documents.

The records show the complaints were either reported to a regional office or triggered a visit by an inspector to the school. The school has continued to operate without interruption from the province.

“Every once in a while we get a question about marks being higher,” says Rashid. “We were able to satisfy (inspectors) that we were doing assessments based on ministry guidelines.”

Ministry inspectors consider areas such as the instructional hours, curriculum, assessment and evaluation and student record keeping but do not impose sanctions for internal school policies, ministry spokesperson Derek Luk said in a written response.

“Private schools are private businesses and they set their own policies and procedures.”

Last year was the first time in five years that any Ontario private school had its credit-granting authority revoked.

But even revocation is no assurance that questionable operators will be removed from the system.

ACEit Secondary School, for example, was stripped of its credit-granting authority in June 2010.

Inspection records found the school had “inaccurate or missing records,” was waiving prerequisites and enrolling students who had never stepped foot in Ontario.

Former ACEit principal Tariq Butt acknowledges his school gave out credits to students who received as little as 50 hours of instruction, less than half of the 110 hours stipulated by province. He says he was too hands-off and entrusted staff to manage the school.

“I deserve the blame for it,” he said in an interview. “There were things being done without my consent

or my knowledge . . . This school had many loopholes in terms of how they were getting around (ministry requirements) . . .

“There was havoc in terms of student records, there was havoc in terms of the instruction, a lot of the times, they (teachers) were not meeting the required number of hours.”

He says tight regulation of the private school sector is required.

“We need to be under a magnifying glass because there is potential to exploit these children and make a quick buck. And a lot of schools are doing that, and I’ve been at a school that did that.”

The same month ACEit was stripped of its credit-granting authority, Butt and a teacher from the school applied successfully to operate a new private school.

Last September, they began granting ministry-approved credits at Alathena International Academy with locations in Scarborough and Richmond Hill.

Butt, who was approved by the ministry as principal of the school last year, says the new school is following all ministry requirements.

His colleague and former ACEit teacher, Simon Huynh, has since become principal.

Jim Sebastian, who worked for the ministry of education from 1990 to 2005 in part as an enforcement coordinator for private schools, says that there would be fewer issues with revocation if there were more stringent regulations.

“What is this all about, this credit-revoking business? It’s finger-wagging. To start a private school in this province all you have to do is tell the province. You have to fill out a form. There’s no regulation. Zero.”

Sebastian, who now owns a consulting firm that includes private school operators among its clients, says he has gained new insights into the scope of the problem after being approached to work for some private school operators.

“I didn’t realize they were such bad guys. I naively thought they actually wanted me to do something good. They wanted me to help them be worse . . .

“You would have thought this government, elected on the issue of education, would do something. But there’s been no movement. I don’t know why.”

Tomorrow

Star reporter Jennifer Yang went undercover for a month at a private high school, posing as an underachieving student. Read the Saturday Star for a behind-the-desk look at the inside of a credit mill.

The following student journalists from the Ryerson School of Journalism contributed to the research and reporting of this series: Marta Iwanek, Carys Mills, Mariana Ionova, Liam McGowan, Alex Bosanac and Shaheer Choudhury