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Cracking down on credit mills: what's the solution?

September 25, 2011

Jennifer Yang

High school “credit mills” are bad for students — this much has been acknowledged by the three leaders of Ontario’s major political parties.

But so far, none has come forward to offer any meaningful solutions. As a provincial election looms, the *Toronto Star* looks to education experts for their views on how the incoming government can eliminate for-profit private schools that sell credits and grades to undeserving students.

Rethinking the “P”

Currently, credits obtained from private schools are flagged with a “P” designation on student transcripts. For university officials, however, the “P” tells them nothing about the schools where these grades were obtained.

A quick fix could be to simply list the names of private schools, a solution the education minister has agreed to pursue. “We will require transcripts include the name of private institutions so that colleges or universities will be able to see where grades are earned,” Leona Dombrowsky said in a statement. But even with this added information, colleges and universities still need to know how to rank the hundreds of private schools in Ontario — something they may not be able, or willing, to put the effort into doing.

Standardized testing

Critics of uneven academic playing fields often point to standardized testing as an equalizer. “This is an easy policy fix by the provincial government,” said Dr. Watson Scott Swail, president and CEO of the Educational Policy Institute, in an emailed statement. “End-of-course examinations take (credit) mills completely off the table . . . Very simple solution, but the

policy-makers have to make this happen.”

Swail said standardized tests would provide a “normative comparison for academic growth” but adds they should be just one of many “tools in the tool box.”

For Alice Pitt, York University’s dean of education, standardized testing is too blunt a tool for a problem like credit mills. “I just think that’s a very bad policy approach . . . to try and fix a small but very irritating problem with a huge whack of a policy initiative that would cost a fortune,” said Pitt, who believes the best solution for drawing kids away from credit mills is to improve the public school system.

Better inspections

In Ontario, there are more than 358 credit-granting private schools. Meanwhile, there are only 28 “education officers” charged with inspecting them, while also juggling other responsibilities such as liaising with school boards and handling parent complaints.

According to Jim Sebastian, a former enforcement coordinator with the Ministry of Education, the province needs to double its complement of inspectors to meet current demands — but with salaries ranging from \$85,964 to \$116,683, this is an expensive solution.

His preferred remedy is better, not more, inspections. “It’s not necessarily the number of inspectors, it’s how you deploy the resources,” he said. Sebastian suggests a system where schools with good track records are inspected less frequently so inspectors can devote their time to problematic schools.

Independent accreditation

For some experts, perhaps the best alternative is to off-load the burden — and cost — of regulating private schools altogether. In Canada, prestigious schools like Havergal College and Upper Canada College belong to accreditation bodies such as Canadian Accredited Independent Schools and Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario. These bodies have their own boards of directors and conduct regular audits of their member schools, which must pass a rigorous application process to obtain accreditation.

But accreditation with CIS Ontario or CAIS is not for every school, said CAIS executive director Anne-Marie Kee. She points

out that there is a wide-range of private schools in every province, all fulfilling disparate roles, and not all would be suited to a membership with CAIS or CIS Ontario.

“I really think that there are different kinds of schools and I think our accreditation works well for those schools that want to reach higher standards,” she said.

More regulation

Ultimately, eliminating credit mills will require some serious political will. As it stands, the province has minimal legislation when it comes to private schools (by comparison, British Columbia, which does provide funding to some private schools, has an Independent Schools Act that requires the regulation of all private schools).

“My personal view would be that there needs to be some regulation,” said Ben Levin, an education professor with the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and former deputy minister of education. Some examples might be: requiring private schools to hire certified teachers, requiring private schools to use Ontario textbooks, and implementing stricter rules for who can open a private school (currently, the only requirement is a form and nominal fee).

But the vast majority of Ontario private schools are legitimate institutions and some will resist a regulatory regime for private schools funded by the public purse.

“The challenge is: how do we create a regulatory regime that (controls credit mills) without unduly penalizing other private institutions that have operated for a long time?” Levin said. “As in most public policy cases, if there was an easy solution, we would have it.”

With files from Robert Cribb, Marta Iwanek, Carys Mills, Mariana Ionova, Liam McGowan, Alex Bosanac and Shaheer Choudhury