

Is Competition The Best Way To Ensure The Future Of Public School Systems?



By Steve Mertl | [Daily Brew](#) – Wed, 12 Oct, 2011

Parents today are looking for every advantage when it comes to their kids' education, as a couple of opinion pieces in the Globe and Mail illustrate.

Economist Stephen Gordon writes in the Globe that Ontario's non-Catholic parents are at a disadvantage compared with their Catholic counterparts.

Like many provinces, Ontario has separate public and Catholic school systems. However in the Globe's Economy Lab blog, Gordon points out that while Catholics can opt to send their children to a public school, non-Catholics don't have that choice.

Gordon says public schools have a monopoly on non-Catholics who can't afford private schools while separate schools must work to keep families from opting to switch to the public system.

"Basic economics would predict that the competitive pressures on separate school administrators would provide stronger incentives to provide better education outcomes," he writes. "And that seems to be just what is happening."

Gordon points to two studies that show this situation results in separate school boards outperforming their public counterparts. Quebec, with its separate English and French public systems, is also involved in a similar situation, he says. Unless the parent was educated in English, the child must attend a French-language school.

"If we wanted to apply the Ontario story to Quebec, we'd predict that the English system generated better outcomes than the French system," Gordon writes. "And anecdotal evidence would appear to be consistent with that claim. For example, a 2008 open letter by Jacques Parizeau called attention to the sizable gap in graduation rates in the English and French school boards.

"This systematic discrepancy in education outcomes doesn't seem fair. So the question is: do we remove the choices available to these fortunate subgroups? Or do we look for some way to extend these benefits to the entire population?"

Political scientist Tom Flanagan would opt for the second option. In a recent op-ed piece in the *Globe*, Flanagan, a former close adviser to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, lauds Alberta's competitive approach to education.

"When British Prime Minister David Cameron spoke to the Canadian Parliament, he mentioned that Alberta schools routinely rank higher than those of any other English-speaking jurisdiction in international tests of educational competence," said the University of Calgary academic.

"The fact is interesting in itself, but the reason behind it is even more interesting — that there is such a high degree of competition in Alberta's educational sector. Of course, a degree of educational competition exists in other provinces, but Alberta has gone further by combining all forms of competition present in Canada with other innovations."

Like Ontario, Alberta has competition between public and Roman Catholic school systems, which receive equal government funding. However, many parents can choose to send their kids to either system.

There is also competition from private schools, both secular and religious, which receive substantial funding from the province, with tuition covering the rest.

"This subsidy brings private education within the means of many Alberta families," Flanagan wrote.

Parents also have the choice of completely unsubsidized private schools that don't teach the Alberta curriculum, or they can home school.

"These parents are free to spend extraordinary amounts of money or time on what they perceive to be their children's future welfare," Flanagan said.

Alberta also has parent-controlled charter public schools that do not charge tuition but can follow non-religious educational approaches not available in the public system.

The plethora of choice has forced the public system to fight back to avoid losing students and being forced to close schools.

"So public schools have created all sorts of special programs, sometimes even special schools, for the gifted and the learning disabled, for aspiring athletes and artists, even for girls and boys," he said. "Throw French and bilingual schools into the mix, and there's an incredible menu from which parents can choose."

"If the neighbourhood public school is still the favourite option, that's because the public schools have had to improve their offerings under pressure from all these forms of competition."

