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***Backgrounder***

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**Education Papers**

## Breaking Down Monopolies:

*Expanding Choice and Competition  
in Education*

Yvan Guillemette

### **The Backgrounder in Brief**

*Economic theory and international experience show that greater school choice can be a winning educational strategy, and can be implemented in a way that preserves social equity and equality of opportunity.*

## ***About the Author***

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**I**n economics, as in most areas of life, it is axiomatic that some choice is good, and more choice is better. By this standard, our provincial education systems in Canada could be better. Most provinces offer families, especially poor ones, a limited set of choices in elementary education and many experts and education policy analysts believe this should change.

Choice in schooling, besides being an important goal in itself — since it closely relates to freedom, a fundamental human right — is also a means by which we can hope to produce better learning and better outcomes for students and society in general. But the devil, as so often happens in economic and social policy, is in the details. Under what circumstances is school choice likeliest to improve educational outcomes? What models exist for implementing greater school choice? What have been the outcomes in jurisdictions that have introduced school-choice policies? And what political and economic barriers exist to greater choice in Ontario and other provinces with similar systems?

To discuss these questions, the C.D. Howe Institute assembled a panel of educational, government and other experts on the subject of school choice in June 2007. Representatives from public school boards and private school associations sat down with academics and policymakers for a seminar entitled “Choice in Public Education” (See Box 1 for a list of participants.) In this Backgrounder, Senior Policy Analyst Yvan Guillemette, who chaired the seminar, sets out the main themes discussed and debated at the session.

### *The Economic Case for School Choice*

A system in which families are consumers — picking schools for their children — resembles a conventional market, enabling economic theory to offer insight into how such a market should function.<sup>1</sup> The two fundamental features of an ideal education market are choice and competition. Choice and competition are the antitheses of monopoly provision. Why must monopoly provision be avoided?

Economic theory tells us that monopolies tend to generate fewer or lower quality services than markets in which there are many competitors. Think, for example, of a local school district in a system where no overlapping districts exist. For poor families with no access to private schools, the local school district is essentially a monopoly provider of education. Pupils within the district are assigned to schools based on “attendance areas” and the school board makes the decision on whether a child can be sent to another school or out of the district. Even if the designated school does not perform well compared to other schools in the area, there is not much parents can do.

Parents are hard-pressed in evaluating how well a school performs compared to other schools, as monopolies do not have incentives to provide information on their relative performance. And because of this lack of information and competition, underperforming schools are not held to account and face little incentive to improve.

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I would like to thank all seminar attendees (listed in Box 1) for participating in the discussion, and additional thanks to those who have provided comments on a previous draft of this Backgrounder.

1 For more on the economic theory behind school choice, see Betts (2005).

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The second problem with monopoly provision is how little variety it produces. Research suggests that no single pedagogical style is best for all students (Morgan 1997; Sarasin 1998). Diverse student needs call for a menu of heterogeneous schools so as to better match different learning styles to different providers. A single school district has difficulty matching the variety in school choices that could be offered with freer entry and exit in a true “education market” with freedom of choice for parents.

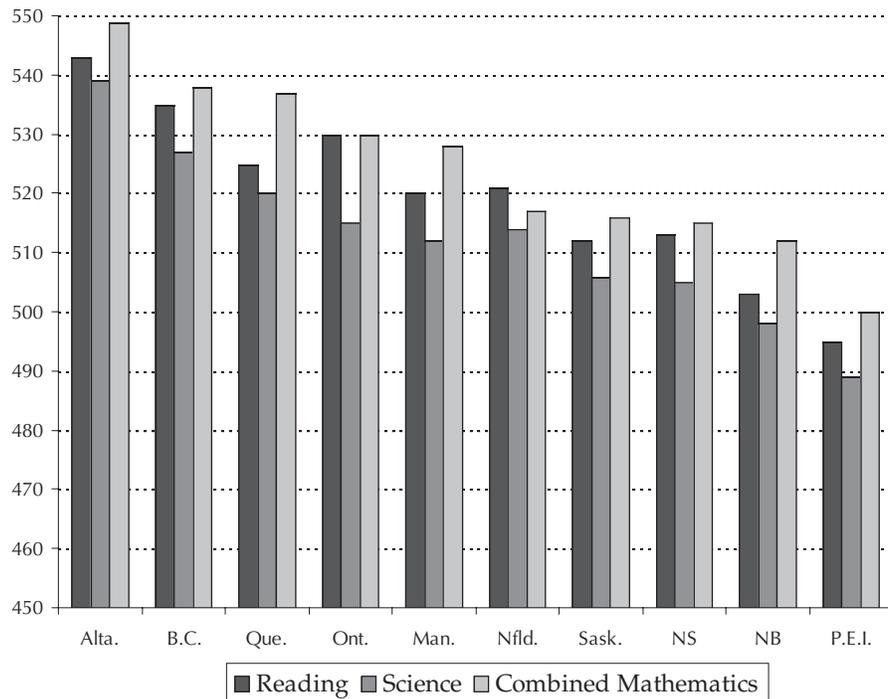
### *What Makes an Education Market?*

In Ontario, each public district school board administers attendance areas for its schools and, generally, children go to the school located in the area in which they live. Parents who want to send their children to a school outside their normal attendance area must ask permission of the local board. They can also request permission for their children to attend an out-of-district school. There are no hard-and-fast rules for whether these permissions will be granted. They are supposed to be granted “...based on program requirements or exceptional circumstances.”<sup>2</sup>

Ontario parents can also choose publicly funded Catholic schools, or independent (private) schools, but the former do not really offer an alternative to parents who do not want religious Catholic education, while the latter are often not affordable for poor families. The reason: private schools in Ontario receive no

<sup>2</sup> The quote is from the out-of-attendance policy of the Upper Grand District School Board in Ontario. In some school boards in Ontario, parents do have the opportunity to send their children to an out-of-district school if it has excess capacity. Some parents also have access to french immersion programs, and francophone parents have a choice between French and English school boards.

**Figure 1:** Average Provincial Scores for 15-year-olds in the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)



Source: HRSDC; CMEC; and Statistics Canada (2004), Tables B1.1, B2.1 and B2.2.

provincial funding, making tuition expensive and the province offers no personal tax assistance for private tuition payments. Richer families can also exercise a form of school choice by choosing where to live. In other words, some degree of choice already exists for the rich, but not for the poor. Expanding school choice would mean making it available to poor families as well.

There are significant differences between the education systems of various provinces. Alberta, BC and Quebec, for example, offer a higher degree of school choice. All these provinces partially fund private schools, making them more affordable to a greater number of parents. Some public school boards, notably Edmonton's, have open enrolment policies, whereby students can attend any school in the district. This creates opportunities for competition within the public system itself. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Alberta, BC and Quebec outscore all other provinces on international tests of student achievement (Figure 1).

Different provinces can choose — and many have chosen — different means of introducing greater choice in schooling. As the previous section suggested, what matters for an effective education market is not the distinction between publicly financed schools and independent schools, but instead the distinction between diversity and choice on the one hand, and uniformity and monopoly on the other. Independent schools can be heavily regulated and hence enjoy little market freedom or incentives, resembling conventional government-run schools. Conversely, public schools can be given a great degree of freedom and exposed to

real competition from other public schools — or from independent schools — and thus benefit from real market incentives.

Starting from a model in which the only available option is a publicly funded government school, a more market-type school system can be brought about in various ways. One is to have open enrolment government schools, or “public school choice,” as in the Edmonton Public School Board. Another is to introduce charter schools, or semi-autonomous government schools.<sup>3</sup> These also exist in Alberta. They are publicly funded, but enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than regular public schools. A third way is to have government-funded or partially funded private (independent) schools. These exist in Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta and BC, with varying regulatory burdens. At the end of the continuum are parent-funded private schools. Minimally regulated, parent-funded private schools can offer all the features needed for an ideal education market. They exist in all provinces, but they are not available to all families because of their high price tag. How, then, to insure that all families can benefit from a more market-like school system? How to ensure that the benefits do not accrue only to the rich and that social equity is preserved?

### *Preserving Social Equity and Equality of Opportunity*

A schooling system will be unjust if one’s right to make choices is somehow limited by one’s resources. This is currently the case in provinces that do not help to fund independent schools, and also in provinces where the subsidized private options are a narrow subset of the options enjoyed by families who can afford any option. To yield their greatest benefits, choice and competition must be available to all. In effect, this means that poorer families must, one way or another, receive financial help from richer families to have access to the same schooling options.

*Vouchers:* The most often-proposed mechanism to redistribute purchasing power is to have publicly funded school vouchers distributed to needy families or to all families with school-aged children. With vouchers of high-enough value redeemable at a wide selection of voucher-eligible schools, all parents can be equal actors in the market for education without regard to their initial socioeconomic status. Vouchers would not completely eliminate the problems caused by public funding, however. A voucher system might precipitate more regulation as government attempts to control voucher-eligible schools, but at least some regulation is inevitable because of information failures — more on this below.

*Tax Credits:* A better approach might be for the government to offer public education tax credits. These credits could be given for donations to scholarship funds, which in turn would subsidize private tuition in schools not under government control. The subsidies could go mainly to low-income families so as to enable them to participate in the education marketplace. Unlike vouchers,

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<sup>3</sup> Charter schools operate within the public system under a charter or contract between a group of parents and the province or local board of education.

credits would be given for families' own educational expenses, allowing parents a more direct financial responsibility for their children's education.

*Parental Information System:* Another important condition for fully realizing the benefits of choice and competition is to have in place an aggressive system of parental information. Governments, perhaps assisted by community groups and non-profit organizations, must reach out to parents with information about the schooling options that are available. The dynamics of choice and competition usually ensure that the right incentives are in place for schools to advertise and provide information about their programs to parents,<sup>4</sup> but there may still be a government role to make sure that the information provided is of high quality, comparable across schools and available to everyone.

*External Standards:* The most important condition for social equity is quality. A high level of quality and achievement must be expected of all schooling options. High quality can be sustained by having clear external standards coupled with organizational autonomy. In other words, schools must be held to account for their performance, as measured by independent external benchmarks (eg. uniform curriculum-based exams), but the standards must be set in terms of outcomes and not in terms of how those outcomes are achieved.<sup>5</sup>

*Performance Measures:* Governments must resist the temptation of regulating how schools go about their business. Instead, they should be held to account on their performance relative to the external standards. Performance measures to focus on include reading, writing and numeracy achievement; school completion rates; performance on examinations in the final grade; successful transitions to secondary studies, post-secondary studies or work; parent and student satisfaction; and levels of social and human development. Again, well-performing schools have an incentive to make information about their performance on these standards available to the public, but there may remain a role for government or outside organizations to publicize the information, hold schools accountable and intervene if necessary to take schools with bad performance under tutelage.

### *Empirical Evidence on School Choice and Student Outcomes*

Preliminary findings from a recent study, the first of its kind for the province of Ontario, show that competition for Catholic students between the public and Catholic systems in Ontario leads to slightly better student outcomes than if only one system were in place (Card, Dooley and Payne 2006). Preliminary analysis suggests that students are willing to shift between the systems and that there is a modest effect on student achievement (as measured by test scores) from the potential competition between the two publicly funded education systems.

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4 The market for higher education demonstrates the extent to which the private sector can voluntarily fill the niche for providing information to students; witness *Maclean's Magazine* university rankings, for example.

5 For more on balancing regulation and freedom, see Glenn and De Groof (2004).

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In British Columbia, the government passed legislation in May 2002 permitting students to attend schools outside their local catchment area, provided space is available.<sup>6</sup> Since this boost in school choice, the province has seen increased student achievement, increased accountability for results, greater school board authority and more involvement by parents. Graduation rates also moved up a step (from 75 percent in 2000 to 79 percent in 2005 for all students, and 42 percent to 47 percent for Aboriginals).

We need not limit ourselves to Canadian evidence. There is a wide body of international evidence on the effectiveness and efficiency of alternative forms of school governance and funding. A review of 59 empirical studies from many countries found 78 separate statistically significant empirical results comparing parent-chosen private schools to government-run education systems with respect to student achievement and five other performance measures.<sup>7</sup> On all six performance measures, a greater number of empirical results showed that private provision is superior to government provision of education (70 results favour private provision versus 8 for government provision — see Figure 2).

More important than the distinction between government and private provision is that between monopoly and market provision. On this score, the evidence from Chile's national voucher program, introduced in 1982, is impressive. Within 20 years of the introduction of the program, test scores in private voucher schools and government schools in both the 4th and 8th grades have converged toward non-voucher private schools scores (represented by the 100 percent line) in a marked fashion (Figures 3 and 4).<sup>8</sup>

### *Challenges and How to Overcome Them*

One of the conditions for competition to work well is to have a large number of providers with easy market entry and exit. In the case of schools, especially in sparsely populated areas, this condition may be hard to meet. One solution to this problem might be to treat school districts or individual schools simply as lessors of educational facilities owned by a city. In this case, "closing a failing school" would simply mean changing the management of the school or district.

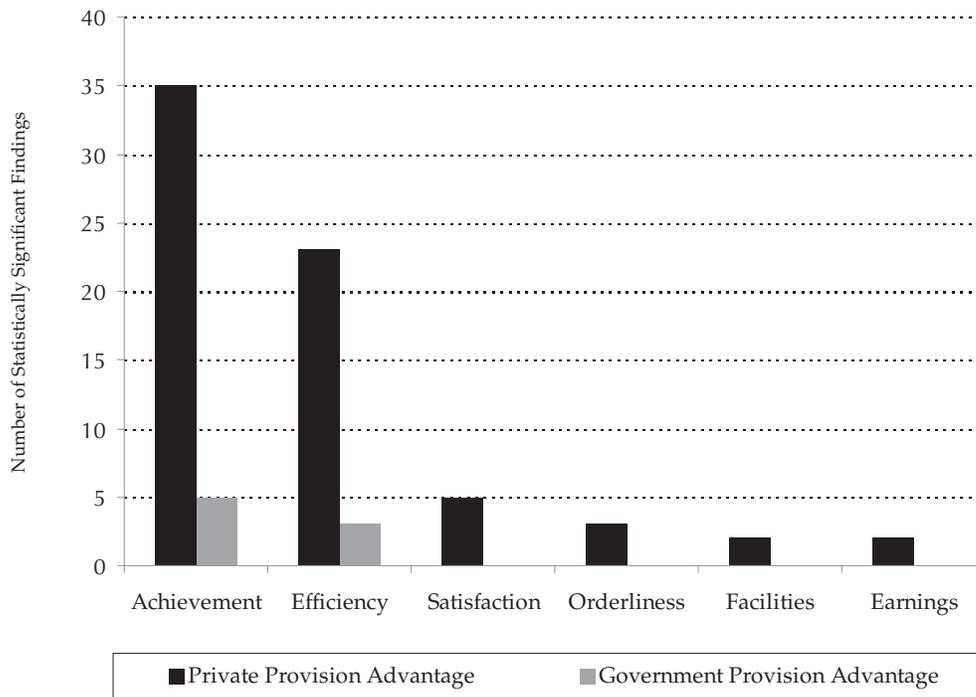
Another solution would be to allow different providers to operate within the same school, perhaps using different teaching methods or a different curriculum. This would allow for greater choice while sharing overhead costs. When offering several programs in every school is not possible because there are too few students, a school board could allow students to attend more than one school to

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6 For a description and an early assessment of the open boundary initiative in BC, see Brown (2004).

7 The six different outcome categories are student academic achievement (as measured by test scores), school efficiency (as measured by achievement per dollar spent), parental satisfaction, the orderliness of the classroom environment, the conditions in which physical facilities are maintained, and the earnings of graduates. For more details on the literature review, see McCluskey and Coulson (2007), and for a lot more details, see Coulson (2004).

8 The original study for Chile is Gallego (2002). Hoxby (2002) found a similar effect of a voucher program on government schools under the much smaller-scale Milwaukee voucher program.

**Figure 2:** *Government versus Private Provision*

Source: McCluskey and Coulson (2007).

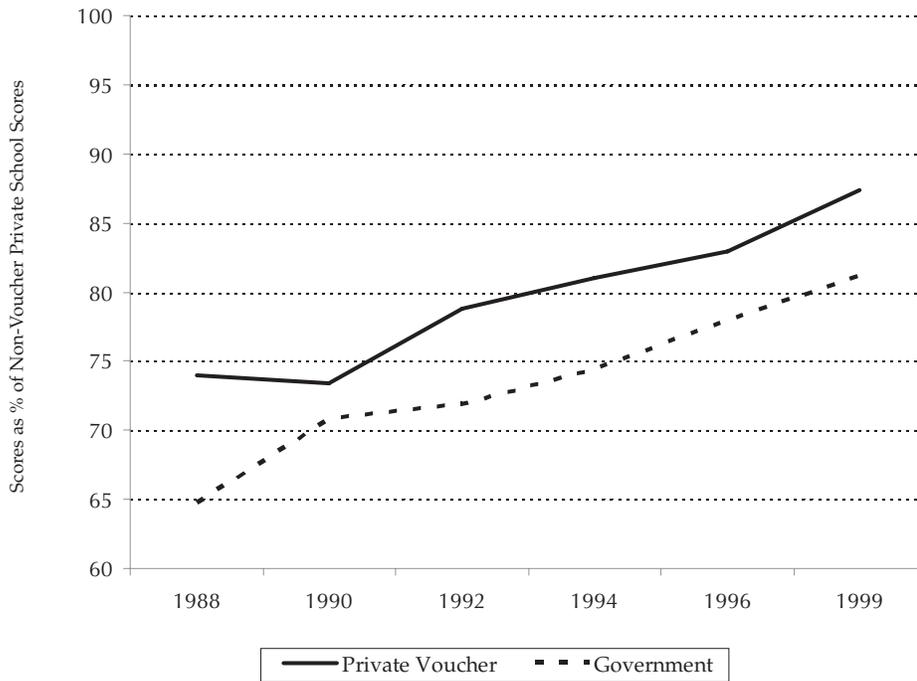
complete their course requirements and fund institutions on the basis of student-periods rather than students.

Yet another solution to providing choice in remote or sparsely populated areas is to make use of new technologies and E-Learning. Not only can E-Learning reach students who would otherwise be hard to reach, the technology can be used to personalize education programs to each child. It also encourages self reliance and familiarity with new technology.

In more densely populated areas, too, effective choice may be limited if kids have few transportation options for reaching schools in other neighbourhoods or districts. One solution may be for government to expand school bus service or subsidize transit passes to improve access to more distant schools.

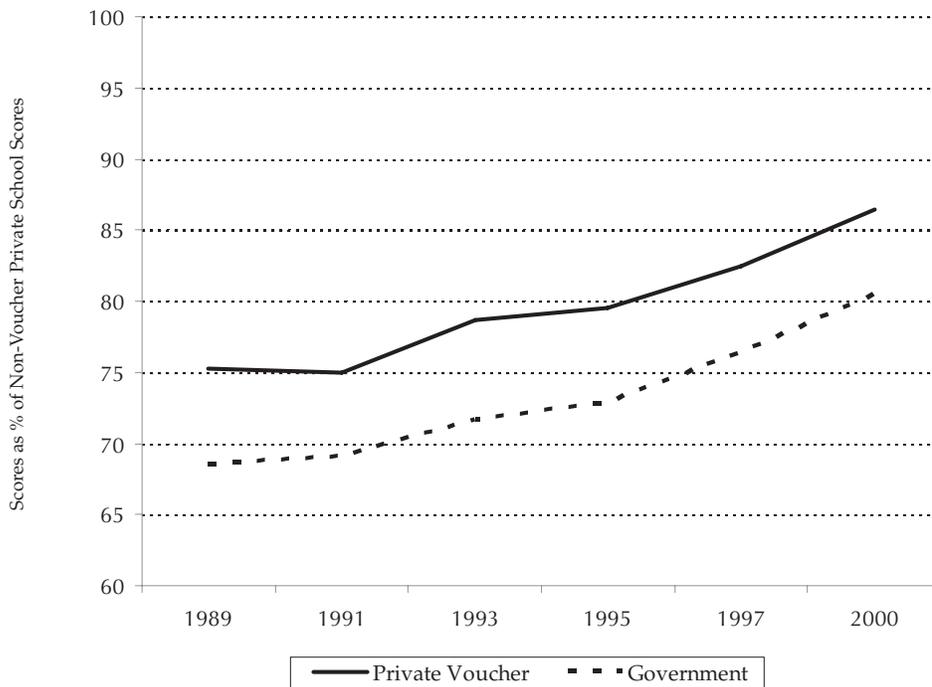
A market-based system also raises the possibility of “cream skimming”; that is, schools may not all be equally willing to accept all students. Several strategies offer mitigation. One is admission quotas — requiring schools for example to admit a certain number of students based on neighbourhood demographics. Another is the use of tradable enrolment rights. With such a system, a school that did not enrol enough students from less affluent neighbourhoods would have to either recruit more of them, buy rights to enrol students from more affluent neighbourhoods from other schools, or both. Students in less affluent neighbourhoods would see an increase in the number of slots available to them in more affluent neighbourhoods. Schools in less affluent neighbourhoods would

**Figure 3:** Chile — 4th Grade Test Scores



Source: McCluskey and Coulson (2007).

**Figure 4:** Chile — 8th Grade Test Scores



Source: McCluskey and Coulson (2007).

receive additional revenues from the sale of enrolment rights (Betts 2005). Whatever the mechanism chosen, to be viable, school choice programs must attract students from different neighbourhoods.

An alternate solution would be to give vouchers of different values to different categories of students. For example, disabled students could be given bigger vouchers, to recognize the fact that teaching them requires more individual attention and is therefore more expensive. Per capita student funding formulas in publicly funded systems already contain such provisions. Another solution would be to require schools to select students among those who applied through lotteries. The government can also prohibit any discrimination based on race, religion or sex.

At the school board level, it is important to have mission statements and boards of trustees that are supportive of choice. Hostile boards can stifle choice through admission policies that make effective choice de facto impossible. In contrast, supportive boards can work with provincial governments to educate parents about the benefits of school choice. They can teach parents that there is no “best school” for all children and that “best” is different for each child. They can help parents find what is likely to be the best option for their child. And school choice should mean choice for staff as well. School districts and schools should put in place policies that allow teachers and other staff to choose what schools or programs best suit them. Finally, because choice increases the complexity of school management for principals, school boards should respond by offering professional development for principals.

Because they require legislative changes, the most wide-ranging and effective school choice policies will not be implemented without support and leadership at the political level. One reason why BC and Alberta have a higher degree of school choice than other provinces is that their legislation is newer and may have presented fewer obstacles. The challenge may be especially great in Ontario as there are sections of the Ontario Education Act that have not been amended for the past 50 years and constitutional issues surrounding the controversial issue of faith-based schools.

### *Conclusion*

In striving to continually improve the quality of education, greater school choice stands out as a promising strategy. Economic theory, as well as evidence from both Canadian and international experience provides support for breaking down educational monopolies and for greater use of market forces, choice and competition in education. Empirical studies of school-choice policies suggest that they have a modest positive effect on student achievement. Besides, they give parents choice, which has value in and of itself. Social equity and equality of opportunity can be preserved through careful redistribution of purchasing power, the measurement of performance, and the distribution of information to parents — and therein lies a role for government. Many different means of providing greater school choice are available, and the experiences of Alberta, BC and other jurisdictions throughout the world should be studied attentively by provinces. Greater choice need not mean taking the “public” out of “public education,” but

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simply redefining public education to mean “choice for all” instead of “the same for all.”

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## NOTES

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