BETTER SCHOOLS Through Choice

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THE ORGANIZATION FOR QUALITY EDUCATION (OQE) WAS FOUNDED TEN YEARS AGO WITH THE PURPOSE OF IMPROVING THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF ONTARIO STUDENTS. INITIALLY, OUR FOCUS WAS ON THE USE OF EFFECTIVE PEDAGOGY TO TEACH BOTH THE HIGHER ORDER SKILLS, SUCH AS PROBLEM SOLVING AND CREATIVITY, AS WELL AS THE LOWER-ORDER BASIC SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE THAT ARE THEIR PREREQUISITES. OVER THE YEARS, HOWEVER, WE LEARNED THAT THE IMPEDIMENTS TO IMPROVED LEARNING ARE NOT SO MUCH PEDAGOGICAL AS POLITICAL AND STRUCTURAL.

Ontario is a high-cost province from the standpoint of wages. To retain our international competitiveness, we must ensure that we get optimum productivity from our labour inputs. This implies that our students (and future workers) must on average be among the top in the world. Complacently accepting third-quartile performance will threaten the future economic and 'quality of life' prospects of our graduates and society as a whole.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

From the beginning, OQE was aware that some of the usual suspects — such as finite resources and large classes — are not the reason that Ontario students score below the national average on national and international comparisons. After all, Ontario spends more on education than most other Canadian provinces, and its per-pupil spending in real dollars has more or less tripled over the last 30 years. During the same period, the average class size fell from approximately 30 to approximately 25. Clearly, throwing even more money at the problem was not the answer.

Eric Hanushek is an economist who used to be famous for disparaging all the usual approaches to raising student achievement — smaller class sizes, more spending, teacher testing — none of these measures did much good. In fact, for many years Professor Hanushek couldn't seem to find anything that helped students much at all.

These days, though, he has changed his tune. Recent research has revealed that the quality of instruction makes a big difference to how much students learn. Teacher A's class may learn more than Teacher B's class in a year, even though the children start off roughly the same. And, in some cases, the size of the difference is astonishing. "The difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year," says Hanushek.

Hanushek's findings suggest that OQE was right all along about the importance of zeroing in on improved teaching practices. While our analysis of the problem may have been accurate, however, our analysis of the solution was incomplete.

WHAT'S BEING DONE ABOUT IT?

OQE thought that centralized curricula and standardized tests would motivate educational leaders to seek better programs. Consequently, our directors lobbied the Ontario government to bring in these things, and we were elated when they started to materialize. It turned out, however, that the new curricula and testing did not have the desired effect. Student achievement remained stagnant.

Why? For one thing, the inertia inherent in the size and complexity of any highly-bureaucratic system like our schools prevents it from changing very quickly. In fact, the primary coping mechanism that bureaucratic systems use when confronted with change is to resist vigorously, typically while making empty gestures to head office or political masters.

We have ample evidence that many parts of the Ontario education system, such as school boards, faculties of education, and even ministry staff, are indulging in such resistance today. A bureaucratic organization operating in an environment where there is competition resists change at the risk of endangering its own health and long-term existence. On the other hand, a monopoly like our education system can resist change much more effectively.

The basic problem is that most publicly-funded schools are guaranteed a steady supply of students and funding; lacking competition, the schools have almost no incentive to improve their results or be responsive to their customers. Typical of monopolies, public education is characterized by inefficiency, mediocrity, and unresponsiveness. OQE has had to come to grips with the reality that the school system will continue to resist change as long as it retains its monopoly status.

WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Unfortunately, the Ontario government has failed to face this fact. Although the government took a leadership role in creating the necessary framework of centralized curricula, testing and funding, it has hesitated to follow through with the second half of the solution: decentralization and school choice.

Believing it possible to improve all the public schools at once, the Ontario government is wedded to the concept of a monolithic education system. Like many Canadians, the government is seduced by the idea that schools should act as social equalizers, places where children from different backgrounds can rub shoulders and learn to get along.

Over the years, educators have encouraged us to believe that such integration will foster increased tolerance and harmony. Implicit in the integration argument is the contention that a single publicly-funded system is also the best vehicle for delivering social equality among groups.

This position is tough to argue against because people do not want to sound as if they are against peace, harmony, and equity. Even a cursory investigation of today's schools, however, exposes a reality where integration is far less than claimed. A glance at the

racial and economic composition of the bottom streams in the province's high schools, as compared to the most competitive university programs, proves that the schools are not acting as social equalizers.

And even in the elementary grades, where there is no streaming (unless you count French immersion), there is surprisingly little social integration. Because people tend to live in neighbourhoods with people of a similar education level, most Ontario children find themselves in classes with others from comparable walks of life.

In contrast with neighbourhood public schools, schools of choice often feature more diversity. Of course, this diversity varies with the nature of the choices, but even some fee-paying independent schools have greater economic diversity, as do most publicly-supported religious schools.

One way, therefore, of increasing the overall integration of children from different backgrounds would be to provide parents with at least part of the cost of tuition at independent schools. The current separation of children on the basis of their parents' incomes would be diminished if all parents could choose from the same array of schools. This arrangement would also go some way toward mitigating the destructive effects of education's monopoly status. In addition, it would provide enhanced equality of educational opportunity by providing all parents with a variety of choices, instead of just those parents who can afford to move to better neighbourhoods or pay for independent schools.

INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS OF STUDENTS PERFORMANCE IN MATHEMATICS

Average mathematics performance (scale score) of students in grade 4, 8 and in their final year of secondary school, by country: 1995

COUNTRY	GRADE 4	GRADE 8	FINAL YEAR of secondary school
INTERNATIONAL	**529**	**513**	**500**
AUSTRALIA	546	530	522
AUSTRIA	559	539	518
BELGIUM (FLEMISH)	–	565	–
BELGIUM (FRENCH)	–	526	–
CANADA	**532**	**527**	**519**
CZECH REPUBLIC	567	564	466
DENMARK	–	502	547
ENGLAND	513	506	–
FRANCE	–	538	523
GERMANY	–	509	495
GREECE	492	484	–
HONG KONG	587	588	–
HUNGARY	548	537	483
ICELAND	474	487	534
IRELAND	550	527	–
ISRAEL	531	522	–
ITALY	–	–	476
JAPAN	597	605	–
KOREA	611	607	–
NETHERLANDS	577	541	560
NEW ZEALAND	499	508	522
NORWAY	502	503	528
PORTUGAL	475	454	–
ROMANIA	–	482	–
RUSSIAN FEDERATION	–	535	471
SINGAPORE	625	643	–
SOUTH AFRICA	–	354	356
SPAIN	–	487	–
SWEDEN	–	519	552
SWITZERLAND	–	545	540
THAILAND	490	522	–
UNITED STATES	**545**	**500**	**461**

– NOT AVAILABLE
SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, NCES 2000-062

The Manhattan Institute recently ranked the U.S. states in terms of education freedom (availability of school choice). After controlling for demographics, spending, and other input variables, the researchers found a high ranking on their 'Education Freedom Index' to be associated with higher student achievement.

Several Canadian provinces, notably Quebec, BC and Alberta, do fund a number of alternatives to the public system. They are, not coincidentally, the same provinces that do best on national and international comparisons of student achievement. Topping the rankings is Alberta, which funds the widest range of independent schools, including religious schools and home schools.

It is worth noting that Alberta's policy of funding religious schools has not resulted in increased religious tensions. It is said that religion is divisive, and so it is in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and India, but those divisions pre-date mass education by centuries. Bosnia's ethnic tensions persist despite several decades of Communist secular schools.

Lois Sweet is a former Toronto Star reporter who began her research opposed to public funding for religious schools but, as she learned more about the issue, she became more receptive. Here is what she wrote about Holland, which has been funding religious schools for more than 70 years.

"For those who believe the public funding of religiously-based schools will lead to ghettoization, social division, and religious conflict, the Dutch experience suggests otherwise. People on all sides agree that differences have narrowed, not grown. This has undoubtedly been in part because a policy of equality and tolerance has contributed to the integration and emancipation of religious minorities."

Religious minorities in Ontario, served by independent schools inaccessible to the public, are far more ghettoized, physically and psychologically, than are those in Holland where they are supported rather than rejected.

Best of all, strengthening the independent schools is likely to strengthen the public schools, as the strong competition galvanizes them into improving their service. In Milwaukee and Cleveland, for example public school parents tend to be more satisfied with their children's schools now that some low-income parents receive the full value of their children's tuition at independent schools.

Funding allows specialized schools to emerge to serve the special needs of children who fall through the cracks of publicly-funded schools. And the more parents who go to the trouble of selecting alternative schools, the more parents there are who have taken an active interest in their children's education — a factor that is, in itself, known to promote student learning. As well, since independent schools enhance parental satisfaction and teacher morale, there are more happy parents and teachers.

The very act of choosing does several things: it brings like-minded parents and like-minded teachers together. It increases parental commitment and responsibility. Above all, it changes the nature of the school from being a collection of individuals acting out their own interests to a community with shared hopes and aspirations.

Sweden has been funding independent schools for almost ten years. The Fraser Institute reports that this policy has proven so popular with voters that "today about one-half of Social Democrat politicians, one-quarter of the Communists, and all of the Environmentalist and Liberal-Conservative politicians support the policy, a sea-change from five years ago when nearly all the Social Democrats and Communists supported the central government's monopoly of schools."

In Ontario, however, parental satisfaction is dropping steadily, according to the annual OISE survey. This is the unavoidable result of trying to put all parents and all teachers into a one-size-fits-all model. Inevitably, both parents and teachers have varying aspirations — not between the two groups, but rather within each group.

CONCLUSION

Three years of provincial test results clearly show that about half of Ontario students are still not being adequately prepared for the work of the next grade. Ontario teachers are unable to get better results because they are still using the same flawed teaching methods and materials — albeit with a few more bells and whistles — as they have been using for the past 30 years. If a new curriculum, enhanced parental input, and province-wide testing cannot induce educational leaders to promote better methods and materials, what can?

The answer is clear. Only competition and the threat of school closure will be sufficiently galvanizing. If parents could shop for schools in the same way they now shop for pre-school programs, then the schools would have to become responsive to their customers' wishes or go out of business.

The world is moving in the direction of increased diversity and choice — except in education. Even our health care system, that we consider to be 'one-tier,' provides us as individual patients with considerable choice. We can choose a personal physician who favours prevention over prescription or one who has admitting privileges to a preferred hospital. Neither decision costs us a penny.

The Organization for Quality Education is calling for the introduction of a wide variety of options for Ontario parents to choose from — including funded independent schools, alternative public schools, assisted home schools, distance schools, charter schools, boutique schools, apprenticeships, and many more. The proliferation of specialized schools will have several beneficial effects.

The most obvious benefit is the enhanced likelihood that students and educators will find a school that meets their particular needs and talents. As well, since all of each school's participants (students and parents, teachers, and administrators) are there by choice, they will be more inclined to work together as a team towards common goals.

In addition, the competition among schools to attract students will increase the schools' responsiveness. Administrators and teachers will become more accountable, since dissatisfied parents will have the option of withdrawing their children from the school. And the very fact that they have this option will render parents and students more accountable too: they will no longer have the excuse that they and their children are without fault, the only problems lying with the teacher and the school.

If schools are forced to compete for students, their staffs will have to choose their methods and materials on the basis of how effective they are, as opposed to their ideology. In addition, assumptions and practices that have been passed along from one generation of teachers to another will suddenly be subjected to critical scrutiny in order to determine whether or not they are still appropriate for contemporary students. As well, teacher training, professional development and research spending will rise, as competing education providers look for better and more-cost-effective programs.

The impact of such changes will benefit everyone involved, but most especially the students.

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