

# The One Hundred-Tier System

by Dan Levson

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Opponents of choice in educational alternatives often raise the spectre of a "two-tier" system that will evolve if choice is allowed. Their under-lying assumption is that there is currently a one-tier system in place. That is where their entire argument falls apart. We suggest that there already exists a "100-tier" system in educational choices. Let us explain.

Wealthier parents choose wealthier areas of the city in which to live. In turn, that means that the children of wealthier parents will also go to school together. This is no guarantee the school will be an effective school, but we know from research that one of the main determinants of children's success in school is the socio-economic status of the children they go to school with. Since there are dozens of socio-economic classes in cities like Edmonton and Calgary, there will be dozens of tiers created by this factor.

Several more "tiers" are created by the organizational and teaching effectiveness within the school itself. For example, one junior high school in an average area of Calgary has almost half of its students on the honour roll. On an individual basis, if a child is unfortunate enough to have a string of poor teachers, the education which that child receives could effectively be very different from that of a child fortunate enough to have had several high-quality teachers.

"Tiers" are also created within the same school by the students themselves in an almost-uncontrollable way. In a larger school, students tend to group themselves together into different groups - brighter students, sports-minded children, trouble-makers, nerds, etc. Each of these cliques tends to create schools within schools. This becomes evident when we talk to students about the quality of their school. The brighter students might say they have an excellent school, excellent teachers, very little violence and lots of opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Other students from the same school will talk about extensive violence, threats, wide-spread use of drugs and alcohol, sexual promiscuity, skipped classes and no hope. How can this be true of the same school unless students are effectively going to different schools but under the same roof?

Within public schools, there are many tiers. For example, a French Immersion parent stated, "I place my children in French Immersion not because I care about their learning French but because I want my children associating with children of parents who care enough about their

kids to place them in French Immersion". Perhaps some parents have found a way to get private schooling with public funds.

The difference in performance between the public and separate schools has created several more "tiers". In Alberta, separate schools, usually Catholic but sometimes Protestant, have constitutional protection (when a minority) for their right to educate their children consistent with their faith. In Calgary, it is our assessment that the separate schools (Catholic) are able, on average, to achieve better academic results, less violence and more consistency between the values promoted by parents and the schools. Some schools have waiting lists of non-Catholics to get into them.

Then come the private schools. Opponents of educational choice in the U.S., like President Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore, send their children to private schools. They are well-off enough to afford it; so therefore they have a choice. A recent statistic revealed that 40% of all urban public school teachers send their children to private schools.

A vice-president of a major oil and gas company in Calgary complains of how much he has spent on tutors to get his children through public education. But he has the choice of obtaining extra tutelage for his children, an opportunity not necessarily available to many average-income parents. So it seems that wealthy parents and others willing to make large financial sacrifices are able to obtain yet another "tier" in the quality of education.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the call for choice in North America is coming from the poorer people, people like the now-famous Polly Williams, a Black liberal Democrat from Milwaukee who has been able to obtain legislation for a voucher system in her state. Giving choices in school selection offers hope to under-privileged parents that nothing else we can see does.

There are probably 100 distinguishable tiers in the quality of education in the Province of Alberta. Most parents, and even some teachers, might be surprised at the variation in the quality of education currently available. Over the centuries, multi-tiered systems have always existed and continue to exist today. The real question is, given a wide variation in the quality of education available to our children, how can we improve the quality of every "tier" and how can we find ways to allow students to move up a few tiers and give them a better opportunity to succeed? We believe wide-spread choice is one important answer.

*(Excerpted with permission from "AQE News and Views", September 1994, the newsletter of Albertans for Quality Education, P.O. Box 4, Station M, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2G9 (403)254-8333.)*

**Organization for Quality Education, March 1995**