

# Charter Schools

## *A Place for Everyone*

By Lou D'Amore

### **We're Looking for the Next Einstein**

reads the headline on an advertisement designed to attract new students to a Toronto high school. The ad, featured in the winter 1995 issue of the University of Toronto alumni magazine, was presumably put there to attract the children of our community's most educated parents.

The ad goes on to describe the school's TOPS (Talented Offerings for Programmes in the Sciences) program. It promises that new grade nine students at this school will be surrounded by others who are interested in enjoying a comprehensive, challenging program, rich in math and science, designed for the leaders of tomorrow.

This may sound like one of the many private school ads that are featured in alumni magazines, but it isn't. The ad is for Marc Garneau Collegiate Institute, a school that is part of the East York *Public* School Board.

It seems that the type of excellent public school for which so many reform-minded parents have been longing already exists. In fact, there are several programs scattered throughout the public system which do promote excellence. Earl Haig in North York and Woburn in Scarborough are two examples of "magnet schools" offering advanced, mastery-level courses to any student within the board who has been identified as gifted or can perform very well on standardized screening tests. Earl Haig has some 500 of these high-achieving, gifted students in its school. No wonder it excels on national math and science contests.

Sadly, though, these schools are not available to everyone. The vast majority of grade nine students in Ontario must attend schools with destreamed

classes featuring a wide range of skill level, interest and motivation. Destreamed students suffer through ill-defined, unchallenging curricula and are sure to be promoted to grade 10 regardless of their performance. It is the recognized failure of regular public schools that makes schools like Marc Garneau Collegiate so appealing to educated parents in the know.

All parents and students deserve a choice, a refuge from public schools that don't work, and CHARTER SCHOOLS may be the solution.

Charter schools are fully accountable and completely open to public monitoring and scrutiny. Charters, or contracts, spell out in detail what must be achieved. Should a charter school fail to meet its contract obligations, its charter privileges are revoked and the school is disbanded.

Charter schools are operated by a non-profit directorship under contract to universities, school boards or ministries of education. They are first and foremost public schools. They cannot charge tuition, and they must be equally accessible to all students in the community.

Charter schools receive the same per-pupil grant money as regular public school students but, because charter school directors have full control over their budget, most schools find they have more than enough money.

With charter schools in place, public schools would have to improve — or risk losing students and teachers to them. The degree to which public schools satisfy their stakeholders will determine the number of charter schools that operate. This competition has the potential to create true systemic improvement in our education system. Why then is there no legislation in Ontario to allow these schools to be established? Why do some resist the idea?

There is an avalanche of evidence to suggest that Ontarians are paying for one of the most expensive and poorly-performing education systems in the world. Budget cuts are inevitable. Rest assured that, when they come, Ministry of Education and Training offices, spewing forth meaningless reports such as *The Common Curriculum* or misleading research such as *The Grade Nine Reading and Writing Tests* will remain protected.

Queen's Park bureaucrats and education advisors can never be trusted to make unselfish budget cuts. They will find it very difficult to acknowledge that their work must always remain secondary to that of the teachers on the front line and the needs of the classroom.

Teachers and parents would be wise to empower themselves by embracing the charter school concept, thereby acquiring the right to make the tough decisions on where the cuts in their own school will be made. The face-to-face accountability required of the boards of directors of charter schools will help to ensure that the right cuts are made.

Charter schools represent a way to divert money around the ministries and school boards through which funding has to be filtered at present. They also give principals the authority to run their schools efficiently, without a lot of red tape. In addition, they offer parents and teachers a chance to choose the best learning environment for their circumstances.

And, most importantly, they open the door to all students, not just the élite, to attend the school of their choice.

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