

Charter Flight

Charter schools in Alberta are flourishing, and for good reason.

By Andrew Hanon

When asked if she was using public money to run a school for élitists, the look on Charlene Crowe's face was the only response necessary. "You have got to be kidding me," her expression said.

Crowe's words, however, were much more diplomatic. "The reason we went charter and not private was to ensure anyone can attend, regardless of income."

Crowe is principal of Mother Earth's Children's charter school, one of three brand new charter schools to open their doors in the province this month.

There are now 13 charter schools operating in Alberta, the only province in Canada to allow them.

The public debate over charter schools has died down in the past few years, but interest in the concept continues to grow.

According to the Canadian Charter schools Centre, student enrolment in the 10 schools operating in 2002 increased last year by more than 40% to just over 4,000 students.

Crowe was deluged by families interested in the Mother Earth's program, to the point where more than 50 children had to be turned away this year because there simply wasn't room. In all, the school has 150 pupils in kindergarten to grade 8.

Charter schools are publicly-funded schools that are run independently of the regular system. Instead of answering to regular school boards, each school is governed by its own board — usually made up of parents — and a charter, or contract.

This contract outlines such things as academic expectations and administrative governance, and must be fulfilled each year or Alberta Learning will shut down the schools.

Because they are publicly-funded, they are forbidden to charge tuition, have discriminatory admission policies, or offer specific religious instruction.

How that would be any different from opening a regular public school in a rich neighbourhood, I have no idea.

Ironically, it seems the people who are embracing the charter concept are those of limited means who still feel their children are entitled to more than a run-of-the-mill education. Mother Earth's, for example, is based

on indigenous culture, and more than 80% of its students are aboriginal — hardly a privileged group in our society.

Charter schools in the Edmonton area include the Boyle Street Education Centre, which caters to street kids and other "at-risk" children who have dropped out of the regular system.

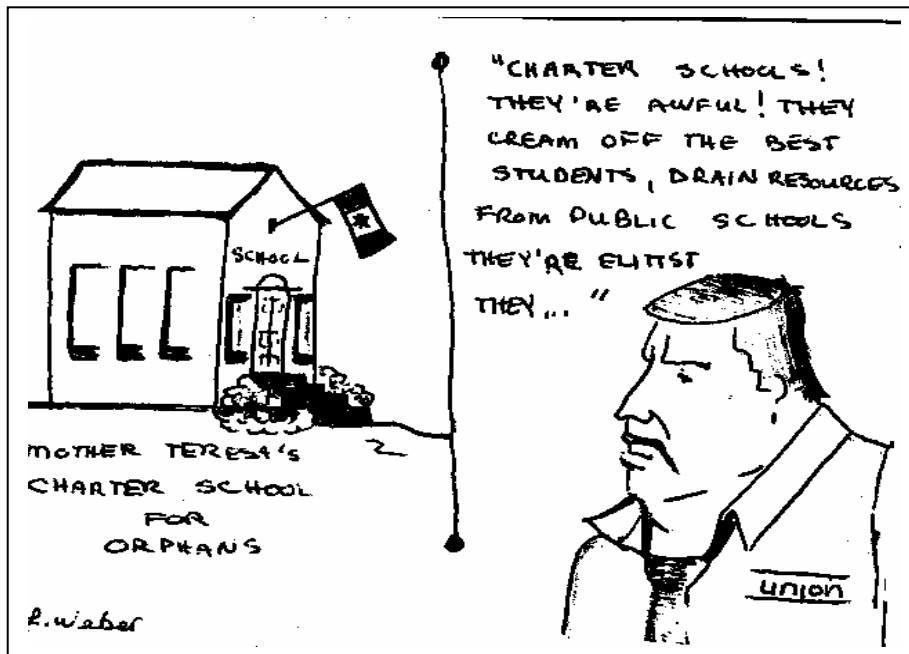
Despite all the doctrinaire bleating to the contrary, charter schools are working in Alberta.

They're not draining cash from the public system, because they are funded with exactly the same formula as regular schools. Whether kids are enrolled in a charter school or a regular school, they cost taxpayers exactly the same amount.

What they do offer is more alternatives, especially for kids who don't fit the mould set out by most public schools. And in the cases of charter schools like Mother Earth's or the Boyle Street Education Centre, they're helping to keep kids from slipping right through the cracks.

How can anyone who believes in the value of public education be opposed to that?

(Originally published in the Edmonton Sun, Sept. 14, 2003)



Supporters of charter schools say they allow for more innovative instruction, greater accountability to parents, and more freedom of choice in education.

Critics argue that charter schools are little more than a scam to siphon off public money for what should be private schools. They warn that the nine-year-old charter school experiment in Alberta is a thinly-disguised attempt to privatize public education.

The union has issued dire warnings that upper-class cheapskates will set up charter schools in their neighbourhoods, thus excluding middle- and lower-income families just because they'll be too uncomfortable to send their kids there.