

# **Giving Parents Genuine Choice of School Helps the Rich and Harms the Children Who Most Need Help**

## ***Myth Number 2 in the Series “Harmful Myths that Guide Canada’s Public Schools”***

**By Mark Holmes**

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The argument that the experts know better than the parents because uneducated parents will make bad choices is full of holes.

First, ambitious and successful Canadians, capitalist and socialist, already do, and always will manage to do, the best for their children — that is why they are successful. They can afford exclusive private schools. They choose to live in affluent neighbourhoods where the schools are attended by affluent children. They are the first to take advantage of open enrollment plans which permit admission to a select few students living outside the affluent school zones. They take advantage of the French Immersion option is they don’t like the neighbourhood school.

Second, the option of the academically-intensive and well-disciplined school most favoured by reform groups is precisely the one likely to be chosen by those who are less well-off. The most-indulged child is more likely to come from an upper-middle-class than from a working-class home, where life has more hard knocks. I noted, when I was doing research on school improvement in New Jersey, that the staff of the designated “traditional” school of choice in Montclair was fearful of their school becoming known as disadvantaged, because it was selected by so many less affluent parents, mainly Black, even though it was in a White, middle-class neighbourhood. This makes sense; the disadvantaged have the most to gain from strong instruction — and they know it.

Third, there is no consistent evidence from research that the affluent are most likely to take advantage of open choice (mainly because so many already manage to articulate their choices). St. Louis has set up a set of magnet schools as alternatives; they are chosen by Blacks far more than by Whites. Professor Bierlein, who has studied charter schools across the U.S., is reported as saying that the majority of “charter schools are being started for at-risk youths” and that there is “no evidence of a ‘brain-drain’ where the brightest students separate to form their own school”.

Finally, even if in some cases middle-class students do gain more than the disadvantaged from genuine choice (as will surely be the case), it is difficult to see why that program should therefore be abandoned.

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Must academic success for some be denied because one cannot guarantee the same degree of success for all? How then do we justify the university? We know well that in all countries it is those already-advantaged who gain most from it.

The real agenda for establishment control of the public school has nothing to do with crocodile tears for the poor or the maintenance of quality and everything to do with the power of bureaucracies and unions who live in comfortable symbiosis, paid for by the parents and the public whom they fail to serve.

*(Dr. Holmes is the author of the 1995 publication “Canada’s Educational Crisis: Problems, Causes and Solutions”.)*