Why One Publicly-Funded School System Can't Work

By John Bachmann

Many people are upset that Catholics are getting preferential treatment in Ontario schools. Some say the solution is to do away with the separate school systems entirely, leaving us with one public system on which we could focus all our resources. While its proponents claim numerous benefits for a single-system solution, they never mention the costs. Reformers who have been dealing with the reality of our schools know these costs would far outweigh the benefits.

People supporting the removal of public funding of Catholic schools also claim that a single system would integrate students of different backgrounds even more than the present system. Over the years, educators have encouraged us to believe that such integration will foster increased tolerance and harmony. Conversely, any attempt to provide parents with meaningful choices outside of the existing publicly-funded schools will, we are told, quickly turn Ontario into Northern Ireland or Bosnia. Implicit in the integration argument is the contention that a single publicly-funded system is also the best vehicle for delivering equity of educational opportunity because all students have access to the same quality of education.

These status-quo positions are tough to argue against because nobody wants to sound as if he's against peace, harmony, and equity. Even a cursory investigation of today's schools, however, exposes a reality where integration is far less than claimed and where equity of opportunity remains an elusive ideal. Go a little further, and you'll find that the structure of the present system actually thwarts integration and equity of opportunity — a situation that would only get worse in a single system.

If we moved to a single system, geography would become an even greater determinant of the make-up of the student population in each school than it is today. But geography is a homogenizing influence. The communities feeding into most schools are not widely varied in socio-economic terms.

There may be 21 languages being spoken in some Toronto-area schools, but you'll be hard-pressed to find a university-bound, affluent Caucasian in one of the classrooms. The ghettoization that status-quo educators warn against in their anti-choice rants is already here

On the other hand, any restructuring of the school system in the direction of more choice, rather than less, will encourage parents to look at programs other than those in their neighbourhood schools.

In enhanced-choice scenarios, more ethnic and socio-economic integration will take place as a result of students' attendance at schools outside their immediate areas. This expectation is supported by a number of studies that have found American charter schools and independent schools to be more racially-integrated than their public-system counterparts.

If integration isn't likely to be enhanced by a single system, what about the quality of the education that students will receive in it? On this score, there is even more cause for concern because what we would then have would be an outright monopoly instead of the quasi-monopoly we have at present.

Defenders of the system respond that the classic arguments against monopoly power may apply to economics, but our schools aren't factories and our kids aren't widgets — so pro-competition paradigms shouldn't be applied to our schools.

This line of reasoning is flawed, however, because the arguments against monopolies don't spring from economics but from knowledge of human behaviour.

Education and private-sector monopolies behave consistently in many ways:

a) they restrict consumer choices to maximize their own profits, power and/or administrative convenience;
b) they resist accountability to their customers; and
c) they change very slowly and only after significant regulatory prodding, political intervention, or the emergence of competition.

Restricting Consumer Choices

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.

Contrast this with the bleak scenario that confronts parents of elementary school children in the Toronto District School Board which recently released its new elementary reading program. Despite the intended bias towards phonics in the new provincial curriculum, the board's program is overwhelmingly whole-language.

This highlights one important way that education monopolies differ from those in the private sector. Unlike private sector monopolies which are still subject to the discipline of the bottom line, educational monopolies can cling tenaciously to ineffective practices and structures for ideological reasons, apparently without consequences.

Experience in other jurisdictions tells us that if less affluent parents in Toronto had the option of sending their children to schools that emphasized early reading and writing mastery through phonics and direct instruction, they would do so by the busload.
But in Toronto, and indeed most of Ontario, only the more affluent can afford the option of private schools that offer these kinds of programs.

Unaccountable & Unresponsive

Monopolies resist calls for accountability to their customers because accountability means reporting results. And reporting results begs the making of comparisons by customers who might as a result ask awkward questions. Hence educator resistance to expanded student testing and the use of test results to find root causes for underachievement and to facilitate the implementation of effective corrective actions.

The inability of monopolies to respond quickly to changes in their external environment will become more of a problem for our schools as the pace of technology-driven change accelerates. Responses to change mediated by the kind of bureaucracies associated with school boards and ministries of education will continue to be too little, too late, and too expensive.

OQE started out as a group focused on promoting the use of effective teaching practices in our classrooms. Over the years, we have learned that the impediments to improved learning are not so much pedagogical as political and structural.

In the last few years, we have become increasingly convinced that the only way that Ontario children, and especially disadvantaged children, can get the best education available is through schools that are held accountable to parents and the general population.

But accountability starts with listening to stakeholders. In Ontario publicly-funded schools, there are virtually no consequences to a principal's ignoring parental concerns about student underachievement. This situation will not change until parents can transfer their children to another school where accountability, testing, and standards are not dirty words.

Discrimination is just one of the problems besetting Ontario schools. Continuing low levels of student achievement are a much greater concern for students, parents, and our society as a whole. When looking for solutions to the former issue, we must not consider scenarios like a single-system monopoly that will be guaranteed to exacerbate the latter.

More choice, not less, is the solution to what ails Ontario education.