

Keeping Them in Their Place

The teachers' unions don't want poor people to have the same school choices as rich people.
By Neil Seeman

It could be an axiom of sound educational policy: when the unions' nostrils flare, administer more of the same medicine. We see this principle on proud display here in Canada, which is experiencing its first privately-funded school choice initiative.

Thanks to the philanthropy of a private Canadian foundation, 150 children from low-income families across Ontario have won grants that pay for half their tuition up to grade eight. "Children First: School Choice Trust" is a pilot project to give freedom to families who seek greater educational opportunities for their children but who couldn't otherwise afford it.

It's hard to object to such obvious good sense, or so one might think. But this is Canada, where the teachers' unions are like irascible elephants. Any innovative thoughts are like fleas in their ears.

According to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), Canada "is becoming more Americanized, more individualistic, and as such more vulnerable to 'free market' solutions to public policy issues."

The union has issued a remarkable brief entitled "Creating a Crisis: Choice Conspiracy Continues."

Among many other things, the brief insists that "there is an organized campaign to discredit and undermine our public schools in order to privatize public education, divert public funding to private schools, and to create a two-tiered system based on school choice and vouchers."

Most striking about union hostility toward choice is the fear of accountability. Earl Manners, recently-retired president of the OSSTF, thinks "school-based accountability is just another code phrase to achieve the ultimate goal of the privatization of the public education system in Ontario."

This kind of attitude is a curious one for an educator to adopt. Not only do the teachers' unions here eschew report cards for schools, they want to assign a failing grade to school choice without examining the evidence.

Much of the union opposition stems from a sunny devotion to all things statist. In a recent speech, in which he condemned the new school choice program as part "of an ongoing political campaign to privatize public education," Mr. Manners celebrated his union's mantra: "We choose public health care over private profit. We choose public power over private greed. And, we choose public services over private interest."

The union has even tarred all private schools as sexist and homophobic. "Scratch the surface of some of these private schools," Manners once said — without marshalling any evidence — "and you will find homophobic beliefs."

Private schools, he continued, "do not reflect the diversity of the province and, in some of them, their views regarding male-female relations do not live up to the standards that this country and this province has (sic) set."

All of this is nonsense. A quarter of the students in Canada's independent schools are immigrants; 29% come from families earning less than \$40,000 a year.

The school-choice drive neither promotes the private system nor despoils the public one. It's about giving parents options and, more particularly, giving poor parents more of the options that wealthier parents have always enjoyed.

What might surprise Americans is that many Canadians actually have greater parental choice than Americans do in education. These choices include publicly-funded independent schools, greater freedom for home-schoolers, and charter schools.

Several Canadian provinces offer public funding to qualifying independent schools, including religious schools. In fact, over 90% of the population enjoys a panoply of publicly-funded school choices.

In several provinces, these funds take the form of per-pupil funding directly to schools, much like vouchers, although the new Premier of Ontario has announced his intention to cancel the previously-promised 20% tax credit to parents whose children attend independent schools.

All Canadians are eligible for a federal charitable-donation tax credit for the portion of independent school tuition at religious schools that is tied to religious instruction, as well as a tax deduction for the portion of tuition that represents child-care costs.

In provinces that fund independent schools, there is a statistically-weaker correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement. When funding follows children to the school of the parents' choice, parental satisfaction and test scores shoot upwards.

Meanwhile, there is no empirical evidence showing that support for school choice has hurt anyone. In fact, greater school choice can promote fairness and co-exist with a strong public system.

All parents appreciate this instinctively, especially single parents trying to make ends meet. Of the thousands of applications to Canada's first independent school choice program, 26% came from single parents.

Why, one might ask, doesn't the OSSTF care about poor people?

(Adapted with permission from "School Choice, Canadian Style: The Teachers' Unions Don't Have a Clue", National Overview, Summer 2003, the magazine of the National Citizens' Coalition. Mr. Seeman is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Fraser Institute.)