

Learning From Success

There are lessons that Americans can learn from school choice in Canada.

By Claudia R. Hepburn

Elementary and secondary schools in the United States and Canada share many historical and institutional features. International comparisons of student achievement, however, have revealed some striking differences between the two countries.

On average, Canadian students outperform their U.S. counterparts. Indeed, some Canadian provinces rank with the top countries in the world, and recent work has shown that their strong performance owes much to relatively better achievement among students from less advantaged backgrounds.

Features of Canada's schools that might explain the better performance of Canadian students, especially students from less advantaged backgrounds, should therefore be of interest to Americans seeking to improve the quality of U.S. education.

The Rand Institute recently released a study that claimed to be derived from an exhaustive review of school choice literature in the United States and abroad. This study concluded that nearly all of the existing empirical evidence on the effects of vouchers comes from relatively small-scale programs, whose beneficial effects would almost certainly differ for large-scale programs.

This important scholarly review neglected to consider the case for choice to be made with evidence from Canada, where 92% of the population enjoys a variety of publicly-funded school choices.

Among the key differences between U.S. and Canadian publicly-funded education is that a number of Canadian provinces provide public funding to qualifying private independent schools, including religious schools.

Historically, these funds have taken the form of direct per-student grants, akin to vouchers, although the province of Ontario is currently implementing a refundable tax credit for

parents whose children attend independent schools. One province also provides some direct funding to home-schoolers.

International comparisons show that Canadian provinces that provide public funding to private, independent schools tend to have both higher average achievement scores and better scores for less advantaged students.

When widely-available, low- and middle-income families take advantage of choice.

Figures on enrolment broken down by family income show that students from families with modest incomes are at least as likely to attend independent schools in parts of Canada where they receive public funds as are students from families that are better off. This fact should allay fears that a larger independent school sector will skim the more advantaged students from the public system.

School Choice Narrows the Achievement Gap.

There is a weaker correlation between socio-economic status and achievement in provinces that fund independent schools. This fact also suggests that such funding is helpful, rather than harmful, to the pursuit of educational quality.

There is strong community support for school choice.

There is no evidence that support for independent schools has harmed Canadian social cohesion. There is no sense among Canadians that British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec, the provinces that fund independent schools, are more Balkanized than the rest of the country.

In fact, national polls show majority support in all provinces for the principle that parents whose children attend independent schools should take some public funding with them or receive some relief through the tax system.

Test scores are higher in areas with school choice, particularly among low-income students.

Higher achievement scores in provinces that fund independent schools suggest that such funding enhances quality, particularly among students from less advantaged backgrounds. It appears that the reaction of the regular public schools to competition from partially-funded independent schools has been to improve their programs.

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report showed that in Alberta, where families have the widest variety of educational choices, public school students actually scored above the provincial average. In the other provinces, public school students scored below the provincial average.

Private schools maintain independence with school choice.

Canadian experience shows that publicly-subsidized, or "voucherized," independent schools can be accountable to government and still maintain their independence.

Canadian provinces that fund independent schools typically require recipients to fulfill key financial and operating conditions, respect the provincial curriculum, and participate in provincial assessments. Schools that choose not to fulfill these requirements are free to operate without provincial funding.

Most Canadians currently enjoy greater parental choice than their American neighbours. These choices include a broader choice of public schools, including separate linguistic and religious schools, publicly-funded independent schools, and greater freedom for home-schoolers.

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