

Choosing Civic Virtue

Exit exams are needed to determine if private religious schools further democratic values.

By David E. Campbell

Ontario's human rights commissioner contends that private religious schools might lead to an apartheid-like system. Ann Bayefsky, a legal scholar, contends that private religious schools do just as well as their public counterparts in preparing students to be informed, engaged citizens.

Without some method of evaluating the civic content of students' education, these competing claims are simply unverifiable. An examination system that can answer the critical question of whether students are being prepared to become engaged citizens has been successfully implemented in a number of Canadian provinces, including Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Quebec.

The model of greatest relevance is found in the province of Alberta. While the other provinces have similar exams, Alberta is the only province that combines exams, a publicly-funded Catholic system, and subsidies for private, including religious, schools. Alberta also has recently created charter schools, and the province is permissive regarding home schooling.

In Alberta, all students in the province take the same exams, regardless of the type of school they attend. Alberta has what is known as a curriculum-based external exit examination system (CBEES). The exams are comprehensive exams with a substantial written component, each on a specific subject. In the senior year of high school, the exam is worth 50% of a student's final mark in a course.

There is compelling evidence that academic achievement is higher in provinces with a CBEES than in those without, controlling for myriad other factors. An exam system like this also appears to equalize the quality of education across demographic groups.

One of Alberta's exit exams is in the subject of social studies – a sequence of courses specifically de-

signed to prepare students to be active, engaged, and informed citizens.

This means that Alberta provides the means to answer the question whether its private religious schools are graduating students who are ill-prepared to function in a liberal democracy. The evidence suggests that private schools do as well as, and perhaps a little better than their public and Catholic counterparts.

According to the test scores made available by Alberta's department of education, 88% of students in Alberta's private schools met the "acceptable" standard on the grade 9 social studies exam, compared with 81% of secular public school students and 82% of Catholic school students.

Twenty-six percent of private school students met the "standard of excellence", compared with 18% of public school students and 19% of students in the Catholic system.

Students in other alternatives to the public schools also came out well. One hundred percent of home-schooled students met the acceptable standard, while 15% achieved excellence. Ninety-two percent of students in Alberta's charter schools had an acceptable score; 27% scored in the excellent range.

A more anecdotal, but intriguing, indication of the success of private religious schools in fostering democratic values is the fact that the last six prime ministers of Canada were so educated.

While these results do not necessarily settle the question of whether private education leads to undemocratic attitudes, they would seem to put the onus on those who question the civic competence of student educated outside of the traditional public school.

Although the type of exam system proposed here would be something new for Ontario, it would not be totally unfamiliar. Ontario used to have an excellent system of "depart-

mental" exams at the end of grade 13 until they were abolished in the 1960s.

Besides allowing for monitoring of the civic impact of increased school choice, an additional positive outcome of evaluating civic education as proposed here is the renewed attention citizenship education would receive in all schools, public and private, religious and secular. Research on the effects of curriculum-based testing indicates that it serves as an incentive for schools to prioritize the subjects in which students are examined.

For example, in British Columbia, which does not have an exit exam in social studies, a recent provincial report concluded that civic education was in a "state of crisis", largely because social studies is shunted aside as a peripheral subject that does not require any particular expertise.

An additional advantage of a curriculum-based external exit exam system like Alberta's is the avoidance of a negative consequence of standardized testing as it is typically implemented – "teaching to the test". With rigorous, curriculum-based exams, teaching to the test is not a concern; rather, it is exactly what teachers would be expected to do.

Existing research indicates that exams like these boost academic performance generally and equalize performance across race and class lines.

If the skepticism expressed about the civic education provided by private schools is rooted in a genuine desire to see schools educate young people for engagement in a pluralistic democracy, then it seems logical for the skeptics to support some means of systematically evaluating young people's preparation for civic life. Whatever the outcome, it will lead to greater understanding of what constitutes an effective civic education.

(Adapted with permission from Educating Citizens. Our book review appears on page 3.)