

# Voting with Their Feet

*Quebec's independent schools are so excellent that they are gaining market share.*

By Peter Cowley

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One-third of Montreal's secondary school students are enrolled in independent schools. Among Anglophone students, the proportion is more than 40%. But it is not just in Quebec's largest city that parents choose private schooling. The province leads the nation in independent school enrolment.

When all grade levels are counted, more than 10% of the province's students go to independent schools and, in the secondary grades, more than 17%. Only in British Columbia do independent school enrolments approach Quebec's levels.

Parents have registered their preference for academically high-performing schools by voting with their children's feet. Since 1999, independent school enrolments have risen by more than 11% while public school enrolments have fallen by almost 4%.

Why do more and more Quebec families choose independent schools? Certainly, some do so because they want their children to be educated within the context of a particular religion. Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Adventist schools are found among Quebec's independent schools.

Other families prefer a school that offers a particular way of teaching, such as the Montessori method, while still others require a school that serves their child's special needs. But all parents want their children to do well in school. While public schools make excuses for poor student performance, the independent schools deliver what they promise: academic success.

In the recently released fifth edition of the Fraser Institute's Report Card on Quebec's Secondary Schools, 86 of the top 100 schools ranked were independent. The Report Card assigns each school an overall rating out of 10 on the basis of academic performance.

This year, independent schools enjoyed an average rating of 7.9 out of 10. Public schools managed an average of just 5.6.

The private-school sector could perhaps take on greater challenges, considering its success in Quebec.

Though several of these independent schools serve students with specific physical and learning disabilities, very few of them have taken up the challenges posed by that large group of kids that the public schools find it so hard to deal with.

These include kids from poor neighbourhoods, the children of recent immigrant families from less-developed countries, aboriginal children and those in small rural towns.

Quebec can bring to bear the zeal and entrepreneurship characteristic of independent organizations to help these kids succeed.

The private sector should lead, because the public schools can't or won't. In part, the failure of public schools to adequately address the needs of the province's under-served students is the result of attitude.

Consider the public schools' reaction to the annual Report Card. Rather than consulting it as a valuable source of opportunities for improvement, public school officials more often counter its release with attempts to convince people that public schools are outstanding in spite of the Report Card's evidence to the contrary.

Last year, the Centrale des syndicats du Quebec, a labour federation that counts among its union membership over 100,000 teachers, launched a public relations campaign.

Its strategy was to assure parents of the effectiveness of public schools by placing large, colourful banners above the entrances of some 600 of the province's elementary schools. Each banner displayed the slogan, "Public Education. It is incomparable."

The unions were on the offensive again this year, supplying their members with thousands of postcards that were to be sent to the editor of *L'actualité* magazine.

The postcards demanded that the magazine stop publishing the Report Card data. Yet the public schools continue to record below-average performance. Quebec should move to encourage its private-school sector to take on the new and important challenge of helping all children succeed at school, regardless of family background and personal characteristics.

Here's what the Ministry of Education can do to encourage the schools in this enterprise. At present, the province operates a voucher system that partially finances independent schools.

The ministry authorizes both public and independent schools to offer education according to the provincial curriculum. However, it provides only about 60% of the per-pupil public-school operating grant to a independent school when it enrolls a student.

To encourage independent schools to serve more disadvantaged and at-risk students, the ministry should offer the full per-student operating grant to independent schools that accept any student who applies for admission, regardless of his or her current level of academic ability.

These non-selective independent schools will challenge the popular notion – expressed so often by the education establishment whenever Fraser Institute Report Cards come out – that what goes on in schools doesn't really make much difference; that rich kids will do well and poor kids will do poorly and that's just the way it is.

It doesn't have to be true. Let Quebec's independent schools show us that all kids can learn and in Quebec's new independent, non-selective schools, all kids will learn.

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