

# Mission Possible

by Malkin Dare

In this article, I propose a very simple and doable action for ordinary people who want to improve their public schools. The chain of logic is a bit long though, so please bear with me.

The first link in the chain is that **public schools, due to their monopolistic status, are very resistant to change**. To date, strenuous efforts – including more spending, increased testing, smaller class sizes, mandatory school councils, standardized report cards, longer school years, and new curricula – have resulted in little, if any, improvement. Recent research and the experience in other jurisdictions suggest that increased competition is the only force sufficiently galvanizing to overcome schools' reluctance to change.

The second link is that **the best way to introduce competition into public schools is to make it possible for more families to choose their children's schools**. At present, most children are assigned to a neighbourhood school that is almost indistinguishable from other neighbourhood schools. Relatively few families have the resources to choose better schools, such as independent or home schools. As a result, neighbourhood schools are able to keep most of their students (and the associated funding) regardless of their level of service. When, however, parents are able to choose better schools for their children, neighbourhood schools are forced to offer a competitive service lest they lose students.

The third link is that **provincial legislation is required before it will be possible for enough families to choose a school other than the assigned neighbourhood school**. Such legislation might:

- Bring in open enrollment (that is, parents can choose any public school in their area);
- Permit charter schools, tuition-free public schools operated independently of the local school board, usually with differentiated curricula and educational philosophies;
- Promote magnet schools, public schools offering a specialized curriculum, often with high academic standards, to a student body representing a cross-section of the community;
- Eliminate school boards, since they stifle the development of specialized schools; and
- Grant tax credits for independent school tuition and home school expenses.

The fourth link is that **provincial politicians are not as free to pass this kind of legislation as one might imagine.** Voters have a comfort zone when it comes to public policy, and any politician who strays very far from the public's current comfort zone is unlikely to be elected. Right now in Ontario, for example, the public's comfort zone probably embraces open enrollment, magnet schools, means-tested tuition tax credits, and possibly the elimination of school boards. Consequently, some political parties might endorse these measures during the next election campaign; however, no political party is likely to promise, for example, charter schools – since they are not yet supported by the public

The fifth link is that **before fundamental public policy changes can be made, the public's comfort zone must shift.** If, for example, public opinion shifts to supporting charter schools, then some political parties might pick up on this trend and promise to pass charter school legislation if elected. The stronger the public's backing is, the stronger the political support.

The sixth and final link is that **public opinion is formed as the result of ordinary people talking to each other as they react to events.** This is where you come in. To continue with my charter school example, you could help shift public opinion by talking to your friends and neighbours about charter schools and how we need them. For instance, when you hear someone complain about his child's public school, you can say what a shame it is that Ontario doesn't have them yet. Then you explain what charter schools are and why we need them.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to tell people about the benefits of more school choice of any kind. Most people will respond positively if you emphasize that parents should have the right to control their children's education and that personalized educational options will actually strengthen public schools.

More information about the advantages of school choice, including lots of myth-busters, is available [here](#). If you are willing to make this modest contribution to school improvement and would like some more pointers, please call me at 519-884-3166.

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