

# School Choice Myth-Busters

Issue 1 EXISTING RANGE OF CHOICES IS ADEQUATE	
<p><b>Myth:</b> School boards currently offer a wide variety of options to parents, such as French immersion and academy-type schools. We don't need more choices.</p>	<p><b>Facts:</b> It is true that there are some public schools of choice, but they are limited primarily to French immersion schools, schools of the arts, and schools for gifted students. Here are just a few of the additional choices that should be available to parents: schools that offer direct instruction, including systematic phonics; schools free from continual labour strife; schools for religions other than Roman Catholic; single-sex schools; German immersion schools; Montessori schools; year-round schools; hockey schools; academy-type schools; Waldorf schools; part-time schools; high-tech schools; and many, many more. These options could be offered by regular public schools, magnet schools, freelance schools, charter schools, independent schools, or funded home schools.</p>
Issue 2 TWO-TIERED EDUCATION	
<p><b>Myth:</b> School choice will create a two-tiered education system because savvy parents, who are primarily well-educated and affluent, will choose the best schools for their children, while less sophisticated parents will not be similarly able to pull strings for their children.</p>	<p><b>Facts:</b> This myth accurately describes the situation that exists today. Well-educated, affluent parents are either working the system to get good service for their children (perhaps by asking for a particular teacher or by moving to the catchment area of an excellent school), or else they are enrolling their children in independent schools. In contrast, parents without these kinds of resources and know-how are forced to settle for whatever comes their way. In an expanded choice scenario, nothing changes for the former group of parents, but the less sophisticated parents gain improved access to what are currently unaffordable alternatives.</p>
Issue 3 SCHOOL CHOICE DISPROPORTIONATELY BENEFITS THE RICH	
<p><b>Myth:</b> School choice is wrong because it will direct public funds to wealthy families, the prime source of independent school students.</p>	<p><b>Facts:</b> Of the almost 900 independent schools in Ontario today, only about 30 are "élite" schools with tuition fees far in excess of the provincial per-pupil average. In the provinces that have been funding independent schools for some time (Alberta, BC, Manitoba, and Quebec), more low-income children attend independent schools, and they form a higher percentage of total independent school enrolment than in provinces that do not fund independent schools. In the US, when the Children's Scholarship Fund offered low-income students \$1000 vouchers towards independent school tuition, more than 1.25 million students applied. The average income of applying families was less than \$22,000, but these families were still willing to make the necessary financial sacrifices to pay the balance of the tuition fees.</p>
Issue 4 SKIMMING	
<p><b>Myth:</b> Schools of choice will skim off the best students, leaving mainly problem students in the public schools.</p>	<p><b>Facts:</b> When there is choice, some people will always make better choices, and the parents of the stronger students will tend to make excellent choices. This is true even in authoritarian socialist countries, where the élite send their children to special schools. But the contrast between the schools with the cream and the schools with the skimmed milk is probably greater now than it would be if more skimming were possible. The solution is not to try to reduce the ability of a few to choose; it is to make it easier for all parents to make good choices. The correlation between socio-economic status and achievement tends to be weaker in jurisdictions with more school choice.</p>
Issue 5 MASS EXODUS	
<p><b>Myth:</b> There will be a mass exodus from the publicly-funded schools, siphoning off desperately needed funds and making them even less able to serve the students who have been left behind.</p>	<p><b>Facts:</b> This myth assumes that parents are so dissatisfied with the government schools that they will flee them the first chance they get. But this did not happen in other provinces when school choice was expanded there. In BC, for example, 8.5% of students attend independent schools, while in Quebec the percentage is 9%. Alberta, the Canadian province with the most choice, has one of the lowest percentages of students in independent schools: 4.5%! As the Alberta experience clearly indicates, as soon as more parents are in a position to remove their children from regular publicly-funded schools, those schools start to offer better service and stem the outflow of students.</p>

**Issue 6 SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS FRAGMENTATION**

**Myth:** *School choice would undermine the important assimilation of different cultures and religions that occurs in publicly-funded schools.*

**Facts:** This myth assumes that at present the government schools are more integrated than the independent schools. The evidence suggests just the opposite. Neighbourhood schools tend to be stratified according to income because people generally live in the same area with people of similar backgrounds. Studies in the US have found that independent school classrooms are more racially integrated than neighbouring government schools, while independent school students are more likely to eat lunch with children of other races. In the Netherlands, a country with a previous history of religious strife, the introduction of fully-funded denominational and secular schools 90 years ago has resulted in a lessening of religious divisions.

**Issue 7 FANATICAL AND FRAUDULENT SCHOOLS**

**Myth:** *School choice would result in the creation of publicly-funded schools that would indoctrinate their students with a very narrow point of view. We could get Moonie schools or Nazi schools, or fly-by-night operations that siphon off millions of dollars before folding.*

**Facts:** Most religious schools welcome students from many different faiths or no faith at all. We already fund Catholic schools without any obvious harm. There is no principled reason to favour some groups, religious or secular, over others. Existing laws already prohibit schools from unlawful discrimination and the teaching of hatred. With regard to fraudulent schools, consumers are protected from criminal activity by the same laws that protect them from fraud in other sectors of the economy. Besides, governments are poor at regulating themselves, and malfeasance in the public schools system tends to get covered up, whereas fraud in independent schools is usually quickly brought to light.

**Issue 8 LIMITED ACCESS**

**Myth:** *School choice will not benefit families who can't afford transportation or who have children with special needs.*

**Facts:** This myth depends on the old argument that no change should be made unless it creates a completely ideal system. Such an argument, of course, supports the continuation of the status quo, since it will never be possible to attain perfection. With expanded school choice, *more* students will be able to attend *better* schools. As choice expands, the number of suitable schools close to home will increase, thus reducing the need for transportation. Some schools may provide their own bus service or organize carpools to attract more students. With regard to special education students, it is highly likely that the number and variety of schools serving these students will increase when school choice is expanded, thus improving their chances of finding a first-class placement.

**Issue 9 CIVIC VALUES**

**Myth:** *The children in homogeneous schools of choice will be insulated from the rest of society and will not be motivated to participate in community and charitable activities.*

**Facts:** This myth assumes that independent schools undermine important civic values in their students. The evidence suggests just the opposite. Studies in the US have found that the independent schools appear to be more successful than government schools in instilling tolerance in their students. In addition, adults who were educated in independent schools are more likely to vote and more likely to join civic organizations. Although the current Canadian prime minister was educated in publicly-funded schools, the six prime ministers before him were educated in independent schools.

**Issue 10 SCHOOL CHOICE IS INEFFICIENT**

**Myth:** *It is more efficient and cost effective to have one big school system overseeing all of the schools in the area. School choice will be much more expensive, what with duplication of services and administrative costs.*

**Facts:** If this myth were true, then the huge number of school board amalgamations 30 years ago should have resulted in reduced costs. In fact, real spending has approximately tripled over the past 30 years (with no corresponding improvement in student achievement). The truth is that school choice programs actually *reduce* bureaucracy and administrative overhead. In New York City, for example, the government schools have about 5000 administrators while the parochial school system (which is independent) has about 20 administrators. Competition, not amalgamation, forces school systems to be efficient.