

## Frequently-Asked Questions

### **What is school choice and why does SQE consider it essential to learning?**

School choice gives all parents the opportunity to choose the school – public or private – that is best for their children. School choice is advantageous because it encourages schools to offer a competitive service and improves parents' chances of finding a school that is a good match for their children's particular needs. Teachers benefit from school choice as well, because they are more likely to find positions that capitalize on their particular strengths and values.

### **What is the best way to improve student achievement?**

Competition among schools is known to improve their service. As in other sectors of the economy, competition forces educators to improve their service – because if they don't, they will lose students and the associated funding. Competition galvanizes educators to become more responsive, introduce popular innovations, raise standards, and encourage parents to become more involved. Dozens of jurisdictions, in Canada (Alberta, BC, and Quebec) and around the world (some US states, Australia, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Chile) continue to expand options for school choice – [with good results](#). With other countries continuing to forge ahead, Ontario is falling further behind. Experience is sending us a powerful message: school choice improves educational performance wherever it is tried.

### **Does SQE favour the total privatization of elementary and secondary education?**

SQE is dedicated to the significant improvement of student learning in Canada. So long as student learning improves, we really don't care where that learning takes place – in a public school, in a private school, in a home school, in a charter school, or anywhere else. The important consideration is whether the students are learning a lot. Despite at least ten years of strenuous efforts on the part of provincial governments to raise standards, to date there has been little or no improvement. It is time to acknowledge that conventional strategies have not worked and try other approaches. Since the evidence from other educational jurisdictions clearly shows that standards rise when parents can choose their children's schools from a wide array of options, SQE favours policies that broaden the amount of school choice available and accessible to parents. There have been [a number of studies of the effects of expanded school choice on conventional public schools](#) which, taken as a group, suggest that traditional public schools improve when parents can choose other schools.

### **What are charter schools and why does SQE support them?**

Unlike conventional public schools, charter schools – which are free and open to all eligible students – have their own supervisory boards, as opposed to being supervised by a school board. Charter schools are regularly inspected to ensure they are fulfilling the conditions set out in their charters. Charter schools have proved very popular with parents and teachers, increasing to more than 5,000 in the US over the last 20 years. Although the academic record of charter schools is mixed, they do provide competition for nearby public schools – resulting in better student achievement in those schools. As well, charter schools provide significant accountability to parents and students, since they are able to survive only if they can both attract enough students and also fulfill their charter conditions.

### **What are education vouchers and tax credits, and why does SQE support them?**

Education vouchers and tax credits are two different ways to enable low-income parents to consider sending their children to private schools. Vouchers provide cash towards private school tuition, while tax credits enable parents to claim a tax refund for tuition fees. The amount of the subsidization is some or all of the tuition cost, depending on the legislation. As things stand in Ontario at the moment, many families are unable to afford private school tuition fees. Apart from the obvious unfairness, this two-tier policy perpetuates class differences and reduces social mobility. Vouchers and tax credits are equalizing measures that level the educational playing field.

## **What is the best way to teach children to read?**

Over the past 25 years, a prodigious amount of research into child literacy has converged, conclusively proving that the best way to teach children to read is to use systematic phonics. This research has been well summarized by the [National Reading Panel](#), a National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development panel convened by the US Congress. Professor Keith Stanovich, a Toronto-based world authority on teaching reading, writes: “That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well-established conclusions in all of behavioural science”. Despite this consensus among mainstream researchers, most Ontario public schools still use “Balanced Literacy”, a non-systematic phonics approach. SQE provides a [free systematic phonics remedial reading program](#) for the parents of children who are struggling with reading in their Balanced Literacy classrooms.

## **What is the best way to increase accountability in education?**

Experience shows that the best way to increase accountability is through funding that provides parents with the ability to withdraw their children from schools that don’t meet their needs – and to then enrol their children in schools that do. Accountability can be increased through more testing and reporting requirements, but these measures alone are not enough. Faced with the threat of declining enrolment and the associated reduction in per-student funding which can result from parents’ ability to vote with their feet, public schools quickly accept the need to improve their service. This new-found focus on quality is the beginning of true accountability.

## **How much control should government exercise over private schools that receive public money?**

Accountability must be a two-way street. Because education is a public good, it warrants sufficient tax resources to ensure that all children have access to schools that meet their needs. On the one hand, taxpayers are entitled to know that their funding of private schools supports teachers and a curriculum that reflect Ontario values and meet or exceed the province’s standards in all major fields of study. On the other hand, government should not impose a regulatory burden that forces private schools to become carbon copies of existing public schools. A reasonable balance must be sought, including a requirement that eligible schools administer some form of standardized testing, either EQAO tests or commercially-available tests, and the results be made public. In addition, schools should be required to conform to basic standards such as criminal record checks before employing teachers and conformance with the Ontario Human Rights Code.

## **Should government require teachers at government-subsidized private schools to be certified?**

Because government certification is no guarantee of teaching ability, it makes no sense to force private schools to hire only certified teachers. There are many uncertified individuals who would make excellent teachers – university professors, piano teachers, authors, accountants, artists, businesspeople, and so forth. The principal of each individual school is in the best position to choose staff members who would form a strong teaching team. Principals should be given the authority to hire the best possible teachers for that school, certified or uncertified, and then held accountable for the students’ results.

## **What is the role of school boards?**

SQE neither endorses nor opposes school boards per se. There may always be a role for school boards in a choice-based system. For example, SQE endorses a school board like Edmonton’s, which actively seeks to attract students by providing options that parents, students, and teachers seek. Unfortunately, this kind of market orientation is rare in a school board. More common are boards whose actions demonstrate a lack of vision, a protection of the status quo and unionized teachers, at the expense of innovation, and a lack of responsiveness to the needs of their students and the pursuit of excellence. SQE endorses school boards that are effective but opposes dysfunctional ones.