

# Quick Study

ON EDUCATION ISSUES

April 2007. ISSN 1201-215

## Summary

- Several Ontario public school boards have called for the creation of one single school system for Ontario.
- The problem with their proposal is that it would create a public school monopoly.
- Education monopolies behave just like other monopolies. Without competition, school boards have little incentive to provide a good service.
- Instead of creating a public school monopoly, Ontario should emulate Alberta, the province with the most educational competition.
- Alberta's students out-perform the rest of Canada by a wide margin.

**Word Count: 591**

## Marrying Ontario's School Systems: For Better or For Worse?

by Malkin Dare

Recently, a number of Ontario public school boards endorsed the notion of one single school system for Ontario. This seems like a good idea on first look, but closer examination reveals a serious flaw.

In Ontario, most non-Catholic parents have no choice but to send their children to the neighbourhood school assigned by their school board, while most Catholic parents can choose between two schools. If the public school boards have their way, they will have a monopoly on schooling and fewer parents will be able to choose their children's schools.

It's an odd thing. Most people understand that competition is good when it comes to businesses and even quasi-governmental institutions like the post office or the LCBO. Everyone knows that monopolies are unresponsive, inefficient, and expensive. We like the competition among grocery stores, car dealerships, dentists, manufacturers, and so on, because it means we get excellent service in these sectors.

However, for some reason, most people think that, even though it's bad to have a monopoly if you're providing computer software or banking services, it's okay to have a monopoly if you're providing education services. But there isn't really any reason to think that the education sector is exempt from the forces that apply to the other sectors of the economy.

An education monopoly behaves just like any other monopoly. In an education monopoly, schools have a guaranteed stream of students and the funding they generate. It doesn't matter whether a school is doing a

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good job or a poor job – all schools receive the same amount of money regardless of their level of service. Even schools that are doing a horrible job can and do continue to shortchange their students indefinitely. They can do this because they have a monopoly.

However, things can change dramatically when competition is introduced into the education sector. Other countries, like the Netherlands and Sweden, have more competition than Ontario, and their student achievement is better. Even within Canada, there are differences in the amount of educational competition.

Back in the late eighties and then again in the mid-nineties, Alberta introduced legislation that increased the amount of education competition. At first, the Calgary board tried to carry on with business as usual. As a result, Calgary parents started withdrawing their children from the public schools and sending them to the various alternatives that had become available. In spite of the fact that the city was growing, the Calgary school board was forced to close one school after the other.

Finally, the situation got so bad that the Calgary board did a complete about-face and introduced dramatic improvements, creating new schools to compete with the rival schools. Not surprisingly, many of its newly-created schools resembled the competition. Nowadays, the Calgary board is boasting that its enrolment is climbing!

Alberta offers more school choice than any other province, and Alberta students out-perform the rest of Canada by a wide margin. BC and Quebec have less educational competition than Alberta, but more than the remaining provinces – and their students tend to rank second and third after Alberta. The Atlantic provinces have the least amount of educational competition in Canada, and their students tend to do the worst of all.

If Ontario were to switch to a single school system, the amount of competition among schools would be reduced. Such a policy would move Ontario closer to the Atlantic provinces in terms of the amount of school choice it offers. The likely result would be a drop in student achievement.

Ontario needs more competition among schools, not less.

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