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Charter Schools in Alberta: Change or Continuity in Progressive Conservative Education Policy?

The Progressive Conservative government of Premier Ralph Klein undertook an ambitious program of educational restructuring. Among other changes the government provided for the establishment of charter schools in the province. This was the first time that charter schools were to be allowed in Canada and led a number of observers to allege that this was a step toward the privatization of public education in Alberta. In other words, a radical change was taking place. However, a careful look at the education policy of Alberta's PC government reveals that it has consistently been favorable to private and quasi-private alternatives to public education. Many different policy decisions since the 1970s demonstrate this to be the case. Rather than being a radical change, then, the introduction of charter schools is simply an extension of the PC government's longstanding policy of promoting "educational choice."

Le gouvernement progressiste conservateur de Ralph Klein en Alberta a entrepris un ambitieux programme de restructuration du système éducatif. Parmi les modifications instaurées, on compte celle permettant l'établissement d'écoles à charte dans la province. C'était la première fois que l'on acceptait des écoles à charte au Canada et la décision a poussé certains observateurs à prétendre que cela constituait un pas vers la privatisation de l'éducation publique en Alberta; autrement dit, qu'il s'agissait d'un changement radical. Par contre, une étude approfondie de la politique du gouvernement PC de l'Alberta relatif à l'éducation révèle que, face à l'éducation publique, celui-ci s'est constamment montré favorable aux alternatives privées ou semi-privées. Cette prise de position ressort de maintes décisions diverses concernant les politiques depuis les années '70. Plutôt que de représenter un changement radical, l'introduction des écoles à charte est donc tout simplement une extension de la politique de longue date que maintient le gouvernement PC quant à la promotion de "choix en matière d'éducation".

The province of Alberta experienced a significant political change in 1971 when the Progressive Conservative Party under Peter Lougheed unseated the ruling Social Credit Party in a provincial election. Social Credit, a populist relic of the Depression era, had been in power in Alberta continuously since 1935. The Progressive Conservative (PC) Party subsequently remained the ruling party for many years. By the late 1980s, however, under a new Premier, Donald Getty, the electoral support for the PC Party was eroding, and the Alberta Liberal Party threatened to end the PC reign. With disaster in the air, Getty resigned in 1992 and a new leader, Ralph Klein, was chosen. By promising to make major changes in government and giving evidence that his promises were genuine, Klein was able to rejuvenate the PC Party and win the 1993 provincial election, a feat that only months earlier had looked impossible (Dabbs, 1997).

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Klein's administration then quickly embarked on a dramatic policy of deficit-reduction and government restructuring that involved cutbacks in every government department, including the Department of Education. Along with the cutbacks other changes were also made in education. These were discussed in Alberta Education's (1994) *Three-Year Business Plan*, which noted that "the changes outlined in this plan will alter substantially the character of the education system and ensure a bright future for our students" (p. 3). Among the changes were a significant reduction in the number of school jurisdictions, increased provincial control of education funding, reduction of funding for Early Childhood Services (ECS), and the introduction of charter schools. Although these were all controversial to varying degrees, charter schools were seen by many critics as an open door to the privatization of education.

Charter schools are "independent" public schools. Instead of being operated by a school board like regular public schools, charter schools are run by organizations with a specific educational ideal that differs somewhat from the program of education offered by the school boards. The organizations must apply to a school board for the permission to operate a school, but if the permission is denied they can apply directly to the Department of Education. The charter organizations are not directly accountable to the public as the school boards are, even though their schools are publicly funded. Because these schools are run by private organizations with particular educational agendas, they resemble private schools. Allowing them to operate in the public education system, then, has been interpreted by some observers as a move toward the privatization of education in Alberta.

The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) was quite outspoken about its concern in this regard. Buski (1995), the Secretary of the ATA, stated his view that "charter schools are the thin edge of the wedge in privatizing education" (p. 30). ATA president Mackay (1994) agreed saying, "The government plan is to privatize ... Charter schools and the hidden voucher system (funding following the student), along with centralized taxation, clearly point toward privatization" (p. 33).

It was not just the ATA that held this concern. Journalist Lisac (1995), for example, after noting that the business plan called for the creation of charter schools and mandatory school councils, said that these proposals "left the door open for an eventual manipulation of the school system away from public education and towards private schools" (p. 191).

Some academic writing has the same thrust. After referring to the proposals for charter schools, the alleged deregulation of teachers' labor, and the possibility of privatizing custodial work and school management, Robertson, Soucek, Pannu, and Schugurensky (1995) state: "Together, these initiatives move the public provision of education firmly into the private sector" (p. 89). Furthermore, after referring to the purpose of charter schools as creating competition between schools and increasing choice for parents, they make the following comment about the Klein government's 1994 bill to amend the School Act: "In this sense, Bill 19 in Alberta does represent a clear step towards the privatization of schooling provision and, ultimately, differentiation among schools on the basis of parents' ability to pay" (p. 93).

However, it is a mistake to see the Klein administration as making a sudden move toward educational privatization. From the PC government's first term in power in the early 1970s, it has demonstrated an openness to consider, and sometimes adopt, policies that promote private and quasi-private alternatives to traditional public education. Charter schools are simply a logical extension of the emphasis on school choice that has been a hallmark of the PCs' education policy. Thus the Klein administration's acceptance of charter schools is a manifestation of continuity with the previous PC administrations rather than a move in a different direction. By examining PC government policy toward alternative schools, private school funding, home schooling, and the School Act of 1988, it becomes clear that there has been a consistent direction in support of school choice. Why this has been so is another question that cannot be dealt with here. Those who are interested in this latter question are referred to one attempt to explain the continuity of PC education policy generally in Wagner (1998).

The great difficulty in dealing with this aspect of education policy is in organizing the tremendous amount of information resulting from a multitude of government initiatives in this area. Beginning by the late 1970s and extending through much of the 1980s, issues related to private education were frequently in the public eye. There were a number of pertinent court cases, some government and nongovernment reports, as well as an eventually successful effort to rewrite the School Act. Much of this was going on at the same time, and many of the events were related in some way. Nevertheless, the events are recounted separately in order to make sense of them and the impact they had. In the end it should be quite clear that these events, separately and together, point toward the PC government's support of private and quasi-private alternatives in education.

One point that needs to be made at the outset, however, is that Alberta was not alone in dealing with these kinds of issues at this time. A number of other provinces, notably British Columbia and Saskatchewan, also encountered a rising interest in private schools and made changes that encouraged educational choice. For example, the Government of British Columbia began funding private schools in 1987 (Bergen, 1990, p. 12). A renewed interest in private education and educational choice was also apparent in the United States and Britain. This international trend may have been shaped by the increasing conservatism in Western countries that had led to the election of conservative political leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The increasing pluralism in many Western countries may have been another contributing factor.

Methodology and Design

This article relies primarily on three sources of data for its analysis: government documents explaining government policies and the public rationales for those policies; regulative and legislative changes that enacted certain aspects of the government's program; and a review of the printed media (both the mainstream and education press) to develop an indication of public reaction and controversy that accompanied the government's policies. The first source provides an official government perspective, the second provides an empirical

benchmark for change, and the third provides, at least sometimes, an alternative perspective to that offered by the government.

It is important to note that this article is a condensed chapter from a doctoral dissertation that covers the broad scope of education policy in Alberta under the PCs (Wagner, 1998). The dissertation research included interviews with key actors in Alberta's education policy, including three former PC education ministers. Although the interviews touched on PC policy regarding educational choice, they did not specifically focus on it. To the degree that it was discussed there was support for the thesis argued in this article. However, because educational choice was only one among a number of topics discussed in the interviews, I decided to err on the side of caution and not rely on the interviews for the argument of this article.

Alternative Schools

During the PC government's first term in power, 1971-1975, private school supporters were lobbying the government to increase grants to private schools. The Social Credit government had initiated funding of private schools in 1967, but the per-pupil grants, which began at \$100, were relatively small. The private school lobby wanted more. Although there was some support in the PC caucus to increase these grants, there was also plenty of opposition. As a result, the first PC Education Minister, Lou Hyndman, tried to reach a compromise. He developed the "umbrella concept" whereby private schools would come under the "umbrella" or control of the public system and thereby receive full government funding. This would also achieve another goal of his, which was to make the public system more accommodating to the diverse demands of parents. But most importantly, the umbrella concept seemed to be a way to keep both supporters and opponents of increased private school funding happy: it would obtain sufficient funding for private schools, but at the same time reduce their identity as private schools and make them a de facto kind of public school (Sloan, 1980).

There was little success for the umbrella concept as it was originally conceived. In a number of cases private schools entered into talks with local public or separate boards, but only one resulted in an agreement that was approved by the Minister of Education. This was between the County of Camrose and Camrose Lutheran College. All other discussions failed to reach agreement or, in one case, the agreement was not approved by the Department of Education. However, a variation of the umbrella concept developed into the alternative school concept (Sloan, 1980).

In January 1975 the Talmud Torah private school entered into negotiations with the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) in order to attain associate status under the umbrella concept. However, the Superintendent of the EPSB, M.A. Strembitsky, insisted that any agreement between the private school and the board would leave the board with the ultimate authority over the school. Under these terms an agreement was reached between the school and the EPSB, so that the school became an "alternative school" in the public system. As a result of this agreement, the board of the Talmud Torah school became an advisory committee to the EPSB's administration with regard to the staffing

and operation of the school (Sloan, 1980). Thus the alternative concept came into formal acceptance in Alberta.

In 1976 the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) adopted a policy that encouraged the creation of alternative schools. Two Jewish private schools, the Calgary Hebrew School and the I.L. Peretz School, requested and received status as alternative schools. Many aspects of these schools' daily operation, including class size, curricula, and administration, had to be changed for them to receive their new status (Calgary Hebrew School and I.L. Peretz School Association, 1984). Thus in both Edmonton and Calgary Jewish private schools accommodated themselves to the necessary requirements in order to become alternative schools and be fully funded by the government.

It is important to note that legislative changes were necessary to make the umbrella concept and alternative schools become a reality. Bill 43, the School Amendment Act, 1975, was introduced and passed to make the necessary changes to the School Act, among other things. In introducing the bill for second reading, Minister of Education Julian Koziak noted the following:

This will permit the type of agreements we've been reading about, Mr. Speaker, wherein schools, particularly in Edmonton and Calgary, that are presently private schools—through arrangements being made, I think in most cases with the public school board, Mr. Speaker—are to come under the umbrella of the public school system. (*Alberta Hansard*, 1975, p. 1127)

Thus the alternative school concept was a distinctly PC policy idea, implemented through changes to the Alberta School Act. Through the PC government's desire to help private schools and develop more choice and flexibility in the public system, this new concept was developed.

Alternative Schools in Practice

The umbrella concept that led some private schools to become alternative schools also led to the establishment of alternative schools that had no prior existence. A group of Protestant parents in Calgary organized the Logos Education Society of Alberta in July 1977, with the intent of founding Protestant-based alternative schools in the Calgary public school system. Their proposal was accepted by the CBE in December 1977, and their first school opened in September 1979, with 300 students (Logos Christian School, 1984).

The Logos school proved to be quite popular, and increasing demand led to plans to open more schools. However, the growth of Logos also generated significant public opposition and controversy. Opponents saw it as a sectarian institution that was drawing money away from the regular public schools. In the midst of this controversy in Calgary, the EPSB rejected a proposal by a Protestant group in Edmonton requesting an alternative school. At this time, Education Minister Dave King spoke in favor of the alternative school concept, stating that if school boards would not accommodate divergent views, the provincial government would be happy to help new private schools develop (Weatherbe & Wilford, 1982).

The opposition in Calgary increased to such a point that the new school trustees elected in October 1983 decided to terminate the contracts of the religious alternative schools as of June 1984. Although the Jewish schools were able to switch over to the Calgary Catholic Board of Education and continue

operating, the Logos School disappeared (Miller, 1986). The point is, however, that the PC government initiated the alternative school concept as a way of accommodating demands for increased government funding for private schools. Charter schools can be seen as a logical extension of the alternative school concept, but given the added strength of being able to circumvent a school board that is unfriendly, such as happened in Calgary. That is, charter schools can be "chartered" directly with the Department of Education. But the continuity in PC policy should be evident.

Government Funding of Private Schools

Although the umbrella concept and the alternative schools that resulted were initiated as a way of satisfying the private school lobby, the failure of many private schools to reach agreements with local boards of education led to continued lobbying for increased public funding for private schools. The per-pupil grant to private schools had been increased on an annual basis and reached \$172 in 1973. The following year the method for determining grants for private schools was changed; grants were made to be a percentage of the School Foundation Program Fund (SFPF) that the public schools received. As well, the requirements to receive government grants were made easier. For 1974 and 1975 private schools could receive 33.3% of the SFPF, but this was increased to 40% in 1976, and increased each year thereafter until 1980 (Sloan, 1980).

The Edmonton Society for Christian Education (ESCE) was one of the private school groups that had been unsuccessful in working out an umbrella agreement with its local school board. During its negotiations with the board it had kept the Minister of Education informed of developments. But because an agreement was not forthcoming, it submitted a brief to him in 1976 calling for the government to raise the grant to private schools from 40 to 80% of the SFPF grant. It also suggested that this could be phased in over a few years. Apparently the idea was accepted, because the government began increasing the grant each year and adopted a stated goal of 80% as the group requested. It may also be worthwhile to note that a number of ESCE people became politically active in support of their MLAs, and that the MLAs supported the group's requests for increased funding (Sloan, 1980).

Thus the lobbying of private school supporters for an increase in government financial support for private schools had two results: the funding was increased as requested, but the alternative school concept was also implemented in the province. Thus, from the perspective of private school supporters, the PC government had responded in two positive ways. Clearly the government was favorable to the private schools. In fact, Education Minister Dave King went so far as to publicly announce his support for an experiment with the voucher system in Alberta. This would entail parents being able to direct the per-pupil grants for their children's education to any school they wanted their children to attend, even private schools. But King wanted an entire school jurisdiction to volunteer to carry out the experiment; he would not initiate it himself (*Alberta Hansard*, 1981).

The Holdeman Mennonite School Case

Aside from the funding increase and the creation of alternative schools, the PC government showed itself favorable to private schools through the creation of a new category of private schools. This was the result of a court case won by a parent whose children attended a new religious private school. Once again, the PC government proved its support for private alternatives to the public education system.

In November 1975 the Holdeman Mennonites of Linden applied to the Department of Education to have a private school for grades 2-9 called Kneehill Christian School. The following month they were refused approval because three of their proposed teachers were not certificated and the curriculum they planned to use was American. Nevertheless, the Holdemans told the Department in May 1976 that they would open their school in September 1977. At least six other Holdeman communities in Alberta were planning to take similar action by this time (Wolfe, 1980).

The ATA was concerned about this situation and adopted a resolution at its April 1977 convention "urging the provincial government and school boards to prevent the establishment of independent schools" (Wolfe, 1980, p. 84). However, the government did not appear anxious to pursue legal action against the Holdemans. In June 1977 the ATA's lawyers wrote to Attorney General Foster demanding that he take action against the proposed schools. He replied that he did not intend to do so. As a result, it was the Three Hills School District that decided to initiate legal action in September 1977. By the time the case came to court in November, however, the Attorney General had taken over prosecution of the case. As well, although all the parents who sent their children to the now operating illegal school were charged, it was decided that only one parent, Elmer Weibe, would be tried as a test case (Wolfe, 1980).

Weibe was charged with violating the attendance provision of the School Act by not having his children in a recognized school or having a Superintendent of Schools certify that his children were receiving "efficient instruction." Although Weibe's defence had three main arguments, it was on the basis of only one that he was acquitted: religious freedom. It was argued that the Alberta Bill of Rights granted freedom of religion and that teaching his children according to his religious beliefs was an aspect of freedom of religion. Judge Oliver accepted this argument (Bergen, 1981). Thus the Holdemans could continue operating their school.

Aftermath of the Decision

Much of the press response was critical. The *Calgary Herald* called for the government to appeal the ruling ("Mennonite Ruling," 1978). A columnist in *The Albertan* saw the decision as opening the door to the fragmentation of society, with each religious group demanding its own schools, hospitals, and even prisons (Tucker, 1978). One editorialist in the *Edmonton Journal* saw the support for parental rights in this decision as possibly making "every child in Alberta the unconscious prisoner of his parents and their beliefs" (Thorsell, 1978). Another writer in the same paper said the ruling "cruelly slammed the door of a lightless prison on generations and generations of the people most concerned, the youngsters" (Horton, 1978). Clearly there was media opposition

to the decision. The ATA shared this opposition and advised the Minister of Education to appeal the decision (Wolfe, 1980).

Instead of appealing the decision, however, the government changed the regulations for private schools to include a category of private schools that could use uncertificated teachers. These "category four" private schools would also be ineligible for government funding. Category one schools used certificated teachers and received funding, category two schools were for handicapped children, and category three schools were language schools that operated outside regular school hours. The government also decided to compensate public school systems that would lose students to a newly formed private school to the tune of 100% of the per-pupil grant for the first year and 50% for the following year (*Alberta Hansard*, 1978). When asked by NDP leader Grant Notley why the government did not refer the case to the Supreme Court, Premier Lougheed replied that because the case had been won on the basis of the Alberta Bill of Rights, which had been passed by the Alberta Legislature, the case should not be appealed by the government (*Alberta Hansard*, 1978).

In 1979 the government amended the Department of Education Act to ensure that the category four schools would fit properly in the legislation (*Alberta Hansard*, 1979). Thus the Holdeman Mennonites went from the threat of a lost legal battle to having their concerns accommodated in Alberta's laws.

By creating a new category of private schools the PC government clearly made a more accommodating environment for private schools in Alberta. This was done in spite of calls from the opposition and media for the government to appeal the court decision. It seems that the government must have been supportive of more parental choice in education, at least to some degree. This perspective is consistent with its actions regarding alternative schools and private school funding.

Increased Attention on Private Schools

With the increase in government funding for private schools and the Holdeman school case, private school issues were receiving public attention. The perception that private schools were growing also began to emerge. According to Statistics Canada, enrollment in private schools in Alberta remained consistent from the 1974-1975 school year to the 1979-1980 school year at 1.3% of total school enrollment. However, it increased every year thereafter until it leveled off in 1986-1987, but then began increasing again in 1989-1990. From 1.3% of students in 1979-1980, private school enrollments increased steadily to 3.0% in 1986-1987, more than doubling in seven years (Statistics Canada, 1992). This notable increase helped to draw attention to issues related to private schools.

This attention led to a number of studies of private education in Alberta. The Alberta School Trustees Association (ASTA) commissioned a study in 1979 by University of Alberta Education Professor Bergen, and he completed it in June 1980. He noted that some school boards had experienced a drop in enrollment because of the growth of private schools, and that a number of school boards expected further growth in private school enrollments in their areas (Bergen, 1980).

Minister of Education Dave King commissioned a report on private schools to be conducted by Woods Gordon Management Consultants in 1983. This

report, completed in December 1984, recommended that private schools be allowed to continue operating in Alberta. However, it recommended that category four be abolished. All private schools would need to conform to one of the other three categories. There would be strict control over curriculum and teacher qualifications, but private schools would continue to receive government funds. Thus government control over private schools would be tightened. This was in contrast to a report sponsored by two private organizations that called for the preservation of category four and considerable freedom for private schools (Ranaghan & New, 1985). As it turned out, this report was closer to the government's thinking than even the government's own study conducted by Woods Gordon.

In mid-1983 the Minister of Education also created the Committee on Tolerance and Understanding chaired by former PC MLA Ron Ghitter. This was Dave King's response to the Keegstra Affair, where a public school social studies teacher, James Keegstra, was found to be teaching about an alleged international Jewish conspiracy. The Ghitter Committee was to suggest ways of fostering greater tolerance in the school system. Although it was set up due to a problem in a public school, much of its work focused on private schools.

The Committee released a discussion paper on private education in May 1984. This paper was critical of private religious schools and expressed the concern "that the public education system could become fragmented and eroded by the accelerated growth of the private school system" (Ghitter et al., 1984a, p. 15). It recommended that category four schools be abolished and that category one schools be placed under the jurisdiction of local school boards and follow strict departmental and school board requirements. It is not clear how these schools could then be called private. However, the Committee's final report, completed in December 1984, called for less stringent control over these category one schools, allowing them to exist much as before (Ghitter et al., 1984b). Yet category four would still be eliminated.

With the release of the Ghitter Report and the Woods Gordon Report, there was ample opportunity for the government to take action to tighten control over private schools if it wished. Indeed, these reports each seemed to encourage such a move. However, the government continued to deal with the private schools in a much more cautious fashion. By this time the School Act was being rewritten, and the government maintained in the new Act provisions of the category four variety, even though the two reports it commissioned had recommended that such schools be abolished. This again seems to indicate that the government was favorably disposed to private schools.

The New School Act

Throughout much of the 1980s the government was drafting a new School Act, which was finally completed in 1988. The government originally stated its intention to rewrite the Act in the Speech from the Throne of March 1982, but it was not until February 1984 that the Minister of Education formed a committee of government MLAs to assist him in the task. After receiving submissions from the public and stakeholder groups, the committee released a discussion paper entitled *Partners in Education: Principles for a New School Act* in January 1985 (Wagner, 1998). At the news conference held to release the paper Dave

King emphasized the importance of choice in education. He was quoted as saying, "In education we believe that choice is as important as it is in the aisles of Safeway" ("Principles," 1985).

Partners in Education, like the Woods Gordon and Gitter reports, recommended that category four schools be abolished. There would be only one category of private schools, and those schools would all need to follow an approved program of studies and employ teachers deemed qualified by the government. They would also be eligible to receive a per-pupil grant from the government (Alberta Education, 1985).

Both private school supporters and opponents of private school funding were unhappy with this proposal. The private school supporters saw it as being too restrictive, and the opponents of private school funding were concerned about the document's support for continued funding. In the public debate about the new School Act, private school funding received considerable attention. One group, Save Public Education (SPE), even spent \$20,000 on full-page advertisements in eight Alberta daily newspapers to rally public opposition. The leader of SPE, Sheldon Chumir, was especially concerned that the growth of private schools in Alberta was leading toward a "segregated society" (Wagner, 1998).

In the provincial election of 1986 Chumir was elected as a Liberal MLA from Calgary. He became the Liberal education critic and continued to emphasize the issue of private school funding. With reference to the decision by the government to fund private schools, Chumir said, "I believe this change is the most important change in education policy in the history of our province" (*Alberta Hansard*, 1986, p. 885). "The result of this funding has been a tremendous growth in the number of private schools, mainly religious-based, over the last 10 years.... This is a formula for future social division" (p. 886).

The first draft of the proposed new School Act, Bill 59, was not released until June 1987. By this time, Nancy Betkowski was Minister of Education. With regard to private schools, the government had decided to maintain two different classifications that reflected the category one and four schools they had implemented in 1978. The equivalent of category one was to be called *accredited* and the equivalent of category four was to be called *registered*. Two classifications were maintained in spite of calls for the abolition of category four from *Partners in Education*, the Gitter Committee, and the Woods Gordon Report. Gitter then stated his concern that the "registered" private schools would be able to get away with using "inadequate and prejudiced" curricula and be able to employ unqualified teachers. The president of the ATA, Nadene Thomas, believed that the private school provisions would encourage the spread of private schools throughout the province. However, some private school supporters were not happy with Bill 59 either. They were concerned that it gave too much discretion to the Minister in dealing with private schools, discretion that could ultimately be used against them (Koch, 1987).

With widespread opposition to Bill 59, largely for reasons not associated with the private school provisions, it was scrapped and a new one, Bill 27, was introduced in 1988. Its preamble contained an explicit recognition of parental rights in education and also made other accommodations to private schools

such as allowing more flexibility in the use of curricula. This clearly excited private school supporters (Byfield, 1988).

In the legislative debates about this Bill the issue of private schools was especially controversial. NDP leader Ray Martin criticized the government's plans for continued funding of private schools, saying that the government was implementing "what we might classify as a modified voucher system" (*Alberta Hansard*, 1988, p. 1823). In discussing the support for the Bill from the publisher of *Alberta Report*, he mentioned an even more threatening scenario: "Now, the minister [of Education] has her ally Mr. Ted Byfield who thinks this is a great thing because it's the end of public education and the start of private education" (*Alberta Hansard*, 1988, p. 1823).

The Liberals were also strongly opposed to Bill 27. Sheldon Chumir in particular hammered away at the issue of private schools. In his view, "the over-all philosophy of this legislation" was "the privatization of schooling" (*Alberta Hansard*, 1988, p. 2111). In Chumir's view, this was not just another issue among many.

Members may have noted that I focus a great deal on this particular issue of private schooling. We deal in many issues in this province and in the Legislature. However, it's my judgment that there is no single issue we deal with that we have the power of decisions with respect to that will have more impact on our society over the next 50 years than the shape of our school system. (*Alberta Hansard*, 1988, p. 2121)

However, he was unable to stop the Bill or make the changes to it that he desired.

Some educators also saw the new School Act as favoring private education. Durnin (1988), the Resource Consultant for the Edmonton Learner Centre, wrote an article critical of the new Act. In her view, the Act showed that "the government now seems to envisage education as just another commodity, to be placed on the 'open' market" (p. 104). She saw the Act as including "Privatizing sections ... which will inevitably lead to a two-tiered education system favoring the well-to-do" (p. 104). Durnin refers to "a clear right-wing move" by the Minister of Education to endorse a bill "that gave both private and home schooling identical status with existing public and separate schools" (p. 100). In a number of respects, she says, "the final Act echoes the sentiments of private school supporters" (p. 100). It was clear to her that the new School Act represented a major gain for supporters of private alternatives to public education. Many themes of her critique of the 1988 School Act would reappear as critiques of charter schools under the Klein government's education restructuring six years later.

There can be little doubt that the new School Act adopted by the PC government in 1988 was more favorable to "educational choice" than any previous piece of legislation in the province's history. Supporters of private education lobbied hard to expand their rights in the new legislation, and they were successful. The attitude of the PC government in this instance was completely different from the opposition Liberals and New Democrats. The PCs consciously chose to expand "educational choice" in the face of the opposition's bitter criticism. Indeed, at least some members of the opposition

saw the new School Act as putting the province on the road to privatization of the education system. This same allegation would again be thrown at the Klein government years later as a result of its 1994 amendments to the School Act, as was demonstrated earlier. But the Klein changes were just an elaboration of the educational choice options already supported by the previous PC administrations, and the continuity is quite evident.

Home Schooling

The recent growth of home schooling has largely been accommodated by, and some would say encouraged by, the PC government. Home schooling was included in the 1988 School Act, the first time it was explicitly dealt with in legislation in Alberta. Interestingly, the School Act "stipulated that home education students must be supervised by a board, but did not specify which school board a parent must choose. Parents are free to choose any school board in the province of Alberta to monitor their program" (Clendening, 1996, p. 35). This gave rise to the phenomenon of the "willing nonresident board" whereby home schoolers could shop around and register with the school board most willing to accommodate their needs. The boards would receive the per-pupil grant for each child of \$2,100 to \$2,500 (depending on the child's age). Some of the boards would return a portion of this money to the home schooling parents. The nonresident provision enabled small rural boards with little money to improve their financial situation by catering to home schoolers outside their jurisdiction. In 1993 34% of home schoolers were registered with nonresident boards (Hatton, 1993). Some home schoolers attributed the rapid rise of their movement to this nonresidency provision in the School Act (Jenkinson, 1993). Indeed, as Benton-Evans (1997) suggests, it is possible to see the growth of home education this way: "rather than Alberta having the largest number of people in Canada wanting to home-school their children, it is legislation and funding that play a critical role in promoting this trend" (p. 261). And the move toward accommodating home schooling occurred years before the Klein government, once again demonstrating the continuity of school choice as an emphasis in PC education policy.

Charter Schools

It was with these policy precedents that the Klein government undertook to provide for charter schools in Alberta's School Act in 1994. According to the Alberta Department of Education's *Charter School Handbook*, charter schools are "autonomous public schools" which "provide innovative or enhanced means of delivering education to improve student learning" (Alberta Education, 1996, p. 1). A group of people with a particular educational philosophy is granted permission to operate a publicly funded school with a particular educational focus. Parents who send their children to the school must agree with the focus.

Freedman (1995), a physician and recognized leader of the charter school movement in Alberta, defines charter schools as follows:

A charter school is a public school in every sense of the word, but it is done in a different way. Instead of being run by the usual school board, charter schools are created under an alternative legal framework that allows them to be fully autonomous while retaining all the values of public education. A document that spells out their characteristics and operating conditions must be approved by

government in advance. Once approved, this document becomes the authorizing charter. Charter schools are granted relief from much of the regulation paralyzing public schools, and they receive full funding for every student enrolled. (p. 15)

Opponents of charter schools would certainly take issue with some of Freedman's comments. In particular, to say that charter schools are public schools "in every sense of the word" is questionable.

Although Alberta is unique in the sense of being the only Canadian province to have charter schools, the idea for charter schools came from other jurisdictions. Britain's Educational Reform Act of 1988 authorized the creation of autonomous public schools called "grant-maintained" schools. Similarly, with the abolition of school boards in New Zealand in 1989, all of that country's schools became charter schools (Freedman, 1995). "The charter idea jumped to North America in 1991, beginning with Minnesota. California followed, then Colorado, then Massachusetts, then others, until 19 states passed charter legislation. [Subsequently,] the charter idea spread north across the border to the province of Alberta" (p. 13). Alberta, then, is unique only in the Canadian context.

In some sense charter schools resemble private schools and perhaps even blur the boundaries between public and private schools. They are operated by a private organization rather than a school board, and the people who run the school are not elected by local citizens. As well, they do not offer the same educational program as the regular public schools. Thus they are an alternative to the regular public schools, and thereby provide a different choice for parents. This was one of the important reasons for making room for charter schools, that is, to give parents more options for the education of their children. The *Charter School Handbook* (Alberta Education, 1996) gives as one of the five main purposes of charter schools: "to provide parents and students with greater opportunities for choice within the public education system" (p. 5). Importantly, however, charter schools cannot charge a fee other than that allowed to a school board and cannot "be affiliated with a religious faith or denomination" (School Amendment Act, 1994, s. 24.3[4]). Another limitation included in the regulations restricts the number of charter schools to a maximum of 15. This feature should alleviate to some degree the fears of those concerned about the spread of charter schools. By September 1997 only 11 charter schools had opened (Benton-Evans, 1997). Nevertheless, it was the private school characteristics of charter schools that led some critics to see them as the beginning of the privatization of education in Alberta.

Conclusion

In spite of the rhetoric of those who say that the education policy of the Klein government is a dramatic move toward the privatization of education in Alberta, in reality the changes in this area have been incremental. Charter schools do not constitute a radical break with previous policy. Those who claim that charter schools will lead to the end of public education in the province should remember that the same charge was thrown at the new School Act of 1988. Indeed, some public education supporters were concerned about the PC government's favorable stance toward private education years before that.

The Progressive Conservative government has been supportive of choice in education right from the start. This is not to say that the PCs came to power with an agenda to promote private schools and other alternatives, but that whenever this issue has arisen in its various forms, the government has come out on the same side of the question. Whether it is alternative schools, private school funding, home schooling, or charter schools, the PC government has made educational choice available. Thus the provision for charter schools is part of a broader framework of openness to alternatives to the traditional form of public education and should not be seen as a new direction for the Alberta government to take. Indeed, if there is any area where the continuity of PC education policy is clear, this is it. Whether one considers official government documents, the statements of education ministers, or even the government's critics, there is an unbroken consistency from the 1970s through the 1990s that the Conservative government has favored private education and educational choice. In this sense it is incorrect to see charter schools as a completely novel approach of the Klein government.

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