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Alberta Charter Schools: Paradox and Promises

The intent of this article is to examine the role of charter schools in educational reform in the Alberta context and to argue that the real promise of charter schools resides less in fostering innovation and efficiency in public education, and more in providing schools of choice for parents and in addressing diverse values and goals of education. This article is premised on the concern for the global phenomenon of governments adopting market solutions to address "problems" related to diversity, efficiency, and accountability in the public sector. Governments depoliticize education and debates regarding its social purposes "by placing it as much as possible in the province of parental authority" and market forces, and at the same time "deny parents the democratic authority to implement educational policy that requires state support" (Gutmann, 1987, p. 11). This approach marks a "paradigm shift in the economics of education policy and social policy in general" (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995, p. 2), with a new emphasis on accountability and efficiency through competition and consumer choice.

Cet article étudie le rôle que jouent les écoles à chartre dans la réforme de l'éducation dans le contexte albertain. L'auteure propose que le véritable mérite des écoles à chartre tient moins du fait qu'elles favorisent l'innovation et l'efficacité au sein de l'enseignement public que du fait qu'elles constituent des alternatives de qualité pour les parents et qu'elles tiennent compte de différentes valeurs et de divers buts dans le domaine de l'éducation. L'article est né de la préoccupation face au phénomène qui se déroule à l'échelle planétaire et qui consiste en l'adoption par les gouvernements de solutions du marché pour répondre aux "problèmes" liés à la diversité, à l'efficacité et à la responsabilité dans le secteur public. Les gouvernements dépolitisent l'éducation et les débats sur ses buts sociaux "en les situant autant que possible dans les domaines de l'autorité parentale" et des forces du marché. En même temps, les gouvernements "refusent aux parents l'autorité démocratique d'établir des politiques éducationnelles nécessitant l'appui de l'État" (Gutmann, 1987, p.11). Cette attitude constitue "un changement de paradigme du côté économique des politiques éducationnelles et dans les politiques sociales en général" (Gewirtz, Ball et Bowe, 1995, p.2), qui accorde la priorité à la responsabilité et à l'efficacité par le biais de la compétition et du choix du consommateur.

> The word *choice* has a nice sound to it. It connotes freedom. It fits into assumptions of democracy. It awakens feelings of personal responsibility. It raises dreams of fairness. What could possibly be wrong with it? (Howe, 1991, p. 171)

The Context

The perceived crisis in public education and the impetus for educational reform is in large part a reaction to the conditions of postmodern or postindustrial social organization and a lack of consensus regarding the goals of education. In a heterogeneous society where there are fewer shared beliefs, cultural references, and practices, where the population is increasingly mobile and thus unrooted, and where we seem to lack a common purpose and common identity, the communitarian impulse of charter schools becomes attractive. These schools step away from the value-neutral one-size-fits-all approach to public schooling and its noisy heterogeneity of purpose, toward an in-school

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homogeneity of the purpose or goals of education and, on at least one dimension of curricular emphasis, pedagogical orientation, or nonascribed student characteristics. Charter schools have the propensity to become communities reflective of civil society,[1] where like-minded individuals voluntarily band together in a common purpose: the education of their children in a clearly articulated framework (as defined by the charter). In many cases charter school pioneers have united in a voluntary association as a defense against what they perceive to be the tyranny of the unresponsive bureaucratic structure of public education and a desire for a more direct voice in how schools are run (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Holmes, 1998).

Public versus Private Purpose of Education

There is an ironic tension in schools of choice in a public education system. In the case of charter schools it implies that once parents have elected to support sending their children to such schools, they will suspend concerns for individual entitlement (what I want for my child), because they have found a school that addresses the needs of their child and a school community that shares their values and beliefs. Having these needs satisfied, the logic follows that these parents would now channel their energies toward concerns of mutual obligations such as fundraising, volunteering in the school, and supporting the goals and missions of the school. Wells and Crain (1992) in their research on school choice found parents chose schools not only on the basis of student achievement test scores, but also on the basis of the students and families who attend these schools. For example, they report that when African-American families whose children suffer most from the effects of poor neighborhood schools were given the choice between remaining in their neighborhood school or integrating into a more affluent, but predominantly white school, they elected to remain with their friends and in their community. Similarly in Alberta, parents who supported a charter school that had its charter revoked by the government for the mismanagement of its resources continue to rally to resurrect that charter school with a new name and new administration—remnants of their school community still intact. Another charter school, which was recently reviewed by the government and instructed to address the unremarkable change in their student achievement scores, enjoys high levels of parent support and satisfaction because the school affords a safe environment that reflects the values and ethnic composition of their community. These parents report that they would rather work to address the deficiencies in their charter school than transfer their children to another school.[2] There is evidence to suggest that charter school parents are concerned not only with the academic achievement of their children, but also with the kind of subcommunity in which they wish their children to be socialized. The marketplace notion of charter schools with its narrow emphasis on individual rights and competition is diminished when a group of like-minded parents with common interests work extensively together for all children in their school and not just their own (Bosetti & Brown, 1999).

Perhaps the biggest concern surrounding the introduction of choice mechanisms into public education is that market mechanisms, rather than political debate, determine the goals and values of education. This can be best illustrated in the case of charter schools. Charter schools position access to

education as both a public and private good. They remain in the domain of a public good in that these schools of choice are highly regulated by the government, are publicly funded, are not for profit, and have open access. The government determines entry to new providers, monitors the quality of services and the achievement of students, provides basic operational funding for the schools, and requires that these schools follow the provincially mandated program of studies.

Charter schools also fall into the domain of education as a private good in that they are schools of choice that cater to the needs, values, and interests of targeted groups of consumers (parents). The political ideology of the New Right and the political objectives of governments that frame charter schools also define the parameters in which these schools operate and influence the goals and purposes to which they aspire (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995). Market solutions and the commodification of education ultimately results in the privatization of the public good. In an education system conceptualized in such a manner, choice is an illusion. Parents are positioned as consumers, with the responsibility of exercising choice either actively by seeking a particular school, or passively by sending their children to the school in their neighborhood. The responsibility for providing a range of choices falls to the producers (i.e., public, private, and charter school boards), and consumers are held accountable for the results of their good or poor choices (Bosetti, 1998a). Government and policy-makers step away from the responsibility for, and consequences of, the choices provided and consumed, while maintaining control of the educational agenda through performance indicators, the mandated curriculum, and formula funding. This is what defines the major shift in the economics of educational policy and social policy in general.

Competing Goals of Education

Researchers (Gutmann, 1987; Holmes, 1998; Labaree, 1997; Wells, 1993) examining parental choice and charter schools as vehicles for education reform have come to a similar conclusion. They agree that the central "problems" in public education are fundamentally political in nature and are the result of different and often conflicting goals of education. Labaree (1997) explains that schools occupy an awkward position between what we hope society will become and what we think it really is, and between political ideals and economic realities. Wells (1993) argues that the debate over choice has been narrowly focused on parental rights and the free market, rather than on the more critical policy issue of defining "what we want our educational system to be" (p. viii). She suggests that school choice policy is what policy-makers and elected leaders deem it to be. Gutmann (1987) problematizes the dichotomy of positioning parental choice as being either good or bad and argues that this judgment is based on values regarding differing goals of education. The term *school choice* is used by policy-makers and educators to describe programs that have little in common, leading to confusion among taxpayers and parents (Wells, 1993). Holmes (1998) concludes that

> society [government] has an interest in ensuring that young people have a foundation on which to make informed choices when they reach adolescence,

> but parents have a legitimate interest in selecting the values and educational practices that build that foundation. (p. 15)

The differing perspectives on the merit and role of school choice in education reform is most evident when we examine it from the perspectives of government and parents. Government and professional educators view education as serving the common good. It is their responsibility to be concerned with developing educational policy that ensures equal educational opportunity for all children and to address issues of diversity, quality education, access, and accountability. Parents, on the other hand, are unlikely to view equal opportunity and diversity as their ultimate goal for public education. They are expected to work for what is in the best interest of their children. Their primary goal is to get the best possible education for their children, and this may mean accessing better opportunities than some other children receive (Loveless, n.d.). It seems unreasonable to hold parents who advocate on behalf of their children through selecting schools of choice responsible for the education system's failure to address issues of equity and diversity. School districts choose whether to extend themselves on behalf of those parents who lack the resources or the social-cultural capital to intervene effectively for their children (Fried, 1998). It is clear that school choice and an unfettered educational marketplace is not a substitute for state intervention through the development of public policy that ensures that the social, emotional, and learning needs of all children are addressed.

The charter school experience in Alberta provides an example of how the competing agendas of the government and parents have shaped and defined the role and success of charter schools as a vehicle of educational reform.

The Alberta Charter School Experience

In 1994 the government of Alberta[3] passed legislation for the establishment of charter schools. The government introduced charter schools as an "addition to the public education system," and as sites of innovation that would "complement the educational services provided by the local public system" and provide the "opportunity for successful educational practices to be recognized and adopted by other public schools for the benefit of more students" (Alberta Education, 1996, p. 1). Charter school legislation was introduced shortly after a national debate regarding the role of education in the enhancement of Canada's ability to compete in a global marketplace (Corporate Higher-Learning Forum, 1990; Economic Council of Canada, 1992; Steering Group on Prosperity, 1992). The outcome of these debates was a call by various national agencies for ministries of education across Canada to establish environments that encouraged individuals to take greater responsibility for their learning and that of their children; for schools to define their mission, to articulate their methods for attaining it, and to assume responsibility for results (Corporate Higher-Learning Forum, 1990; Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996). They advocated that "clients" should be able to choose the institution that best satisfied their needs and aspirations, and that there be real differences among institutions.

Given this broader context, the Alberta government responded by positioning education as a commodity in the marketplace, and charter schools were

heralded as a vehicle to advance the goals of accountability, efficiency, and performance, and to empower parents and other members of the community to have a more direct involvement at the school level (Bosetti, 1998a). Along with charter school legislation, the Alberta government increased funding to private schools, reduced the overall funding to education by 12%, expanded previously existing provincial standardized testing programs and grade 12 diploma examinations, promoted site-based management as the preferred model of school management, required school councils, and consolidated school boards from 141 to 68 (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). The desired outcome is a public education system that is goal-oriented, service-oriented, and responsive to market forces (Bosetti, O'Reilly, & Gereluk, 1998).

The public response to these initiatives has been varied. Educators have been subjected to public pressure to ensure students score well on provincial achievement tests; there has been a backlash against child-centered, progressive education; and trust in the expertise of professional educators has diminished. Numerous private schools have emerged that promote a focus on a core academic curriculum, a structured learning environment, and preparation for work in a global market. For example, in Calgary where most charter schools are located, three new private schools have emerged to respond to this market, and one of them is already in the process of building an additional campus. The three private schools catering to the needs of children with learning disabilities have extensive waiting lists for enrollment, and the Calgary Public School Board is now seeking to establish an alternative school to accommodate the needs of this student population. In this city the total enrollment of children in private education has increased from 3,900 students in 1993 to 10,050 in 1999.[4] Students enrolled in private schools in the province comprise 3.9% of the total school population, an increase of nearly 1% since 1993.[5]

The government has attempted to depoliticize the debate over the goals of education further by assuming an arm's-length approach to the administration and governance of education, while maintaining a centralist position in terms of funding, mandated curriculum, and accountability. Issues over the goals of education are played out at the local level through school choice initiatives. For example, the Edmonton Public School Board currently has 26 programs of choice in 96 schools, and recently two private schools have been converted to alternative schools in the public education system in this area.

A total of 12 charters have been approved over a five-year period, and 10 remain in operation. One school had its charter revoked by the government for not meeting its charter mandate and for mismanagement of funds. Another school has relinquished its charter to become an alternative program in the local public education system, and another has been given a letter of warning to adhere more closely to the mandate of its charter. To date, few of the charter schools could be viewed as offering truly innovative programs; however, they do appear to be applying a variety of educational approaches in novel combinations, offering programs and approaches to teaching and learning that are not currently a part of the offerings of larger educational systems (i.e., differentiated instruction, project-based learning, individual program plans for each student, and instruction in first language), and providing appropriate programs for groups of students who appear to be underserved in larger educa-

tional systems (i.e., programs for underachieving students who are gifted, street-involved youth, and Middle Eastern immigrant students, Bosetti, 1998b).

The strength of charter schools as a vehicle for educational reform lies less in fostering innovation in the public education system, and more in providing schools of choice for parents and in addressing diverse values and goals of education. In part this relates to the differing agendas between parents and the state, but it can also be attributed to the lack of intervention on the part of government in providing technical support and adequate funding for the day-to-day operation of charter schools and to the reality that local school boards have little incentive to support this alternative in the public education system. Current legislation in the School Act permits public schools to accommodate applications for charters as alternative programs. Although the establishment of a charter school requires near missionary zeal on the part of parents and teachers as they attempt to create a school with little technical or financial support—and within the parameters of cumbersome provincial regulations and weak guidelines—the establishment of an alternative program in an existing public school is created with relative ease. The public education system provides an established infrastructure of human and technical resources and existing facilities. These alternative programs are not under the same level of public scrutiny as are charter schools, and they are not mandated to share their innovative practices with other schools. As a result, charter schools are still in a tenuous position and have not yet defined themselves as a viable alternative in the public education system. They have, however, garnered considerable grassroots support from parents and educators interested in alternative education and in addressing the needs of marginalized groups (e.g., students who are gifted, street youth, and immigrants), and they have prompted some local school boards to be more responsive to parents' desires for alternative programs for their children.

In essence, charter schools have become a marginalized alternative in public education that has effectively addressed the needs of special interest groups.[6] The lack of technical, financial, and moral support from government and the broader educational community has required charter school pioneers to be committed in their quest to overcome what at times seem like insurmountable obstacles (Bosetti, 1998b). In many cases this has resulted in a strong sense of community and purpose. People united through this common purpose, which is variously defined by ideological or pedagogical beliefs, values, or special needs, voluntarily organize and draw on their social and cultural capital to make the charter school of their choice viable. They are bound by their perception of shared interests and mutual goals embodied in their act of public choice (Smrekar, 1996). This sense of solidarity, membership, and mutual support that accrues from community is thought to affect the individual in terms of personal development and integration and the larger society in terms of social cohesion and stability (Goldring & Smrekar, 1997). The charter school movement in Alberta is perhaps too young to assess this longer-term impact on the individual and society.

Methodology

Nine charter schools in Alberta were investigated over a two-year period from 1997 to 1999. A multimethod case study approach was used to document each

charter school situation. A triangulated approach to data collection was used, including document analysis of charter school legislation, charters, monitoring and evaluation reports, charter school annual reports, handbooks and brochures, as well as observation in classes, at special school events, at parent and board meetings, and at meetings with other charter schools in the province. Semistructured interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators, and relevant stakeholder groups to determine the problems and obstacles experienced in the establishment of charter schools, the perceived support for charter schools, and the impact of these schools on public education. Questionnaires were distributed to charter school administrators, teachers, board members, and parents to profile those who choose to work in or send their children to charter schools; issues and concerns related to the establishment and governance of charter schools; teacher workload and professional experience; and levels of satisfaction with these schools (Bosetti, 1998b).

Charter schools in Alberta provide an illustration of the positive and negative effects of schools of choice in addressing the needs of a diverse community in a public education system. Three of the charter schools offer a back-to-basics educational program that emphasizes teacher-directed learning, highly structured learning environments, strict disciplinary policies, and a demand for high commitment from parents for involvement in their children's learning. Three other charter schools offer a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning, emphasizing differentiated instruction to meet the diverse learning styles of students, multiple intelligences of students, and the needs of self-directed or motivated learners. Two of these three schools cater to students identified as being gifted. One charter school caters to the needs of street-involved youth who have dropped out of school and have been shut out of the public education system. They offer an educational program that is designed to provide a safe environment for these youth so that they can acquire a basic education that is focused on life skills and job readiness. Another school, situated in the inner city, caters to students from a variety of minority groups, many of whom are recent immigrants who require assistance with learning English. Most of these students belong to Arabic-speaking Muslim communities. The final school is based on the Suzuki method of instruction and emphasizes an arts-enriched program.

The charter school focusing on the educational needs of street-involved youth is situated in the heart of the community in which the students "hang out." It is housed in the cooperative, multiservice community center where community workers, teachers, and government agencies work together to address the needs of residents in the community. The community is culturally diverse but has common bonds of "poverty, cultural disruption and discrimination" (Bosetti, 1998b, p. 61). Students learn about the charter school through their social network and through referrals from various community agencies. The charter school, as part of the community center, provides a strong sense of community and support for students and improved social connections. The basic ground rules are treating one another with dignity and respect. The teachers and community workers are strong advocates for youth who do not have parents willing or able to advocate on their behalf. The program is designed to provide students with strategies to reengage in the

learning process and to cope with the burdens of street experience and/or inner-city experience. The charter school admits only students for whom it is not feasible or possible to attend a mainstream school.

The charter schools designed for children who are gifted is another example of schools addressing the needs of a group who feel they have been marginalized in the regular public education system. Parents argue that at these schools their children's needs are addressed through the method of instruction, they are challenged by children with similar abilities, and they are happy. A parent of a gifted 6-year-old explains:

> My son is a well adjusted gifted youngster who needs stimulation at a higher level. He reads at a grade 10 level, yet he also needs to be a 6-year-old socially. This school is the perfect blend!

Another parent commented, "We selected this school because of the educational challenge and the fact that the students can work and study as hard as they like without being teased." A parent supported the "homogeneous" setting of a charter school for gifted children because it provided "an environment that encourages her [daughter] to excel rather than coast because she is waiting for the rest of the class to catch up."

Charter schools catering to the needs of gifted children are closely connected with provincial and local associations for parents with bright children and serve as an extension of the existing support network. Parents report that they learned about these schools from other parents of gifted children, through media coverage, and in some cases from school psychologists and other teachers.

Parents who send their children to the charter school characterized by its structured, sequential approach to direct teaching of curriculum, strict dress code, and discipline policies are united in their resistance to child-centered, progressive education and their strong commitment to a particular approach to teaching and conception of the skills necessary to participate in society. One parent explains why he chose this charter school:

> This school has significantly higher standards. It is like a private school. Here students embrace an attitude of performance. [My daughter] is not afraid to do well—it's encouraged.

Another parent comments,

> Here mastery learning is expected. [My son's] teacher expects him to do his work properly and corrects him if he wrong, rather than saying "It'll come" or "He'll figure it out in time." Expectations are clearly defined and he seems to respond to that.

Parents report that this school is viewed as a safe haven from the influences of mass culture, corporate interests, and technology. It brings together parents concerned with a particular version of quality education and a desire for their children to achieve academic success.

Parents in the school that caters to the needs of immigrants and second-language learners speak of their experiences of being marginalized in the public education system, of not fitting in, and of their cultural values and beliefs being unsupported. They feel that their children struggle to become part of the

mainstream in their neighborhood school, are reluctant to reveal their cultural identity, and do not have their educational needs addressed. For these parents the charter school is a safe place where children are among friends, where the school calendar accommodates their religious celebrations, and the discipline policies reflect their values and beliefs. The principal and a few of the teachers speak Arabic, which makes parents feel welcomed and able to be part of the school. During the last school year the school has begun to offer some of the core academic subjects in Arabic to ensure that children's grades and knowledge in these areas is not jeopardized while they learn to speak English. The following comment by a parent is representative of the sentiments of the majority of parents at this school.

> We chose this school because it teaches Arabic. We want a Muslim school that has a Muslim culture and environment. We expect a school that is safe, with tough discipline, and better exam results.

Most parents of students at this school, who are low-income wage-earners and struggle with the English language, indicate that the critical factors influencing their decision to send their children to this charter school include cultural familiarity; shared values, customs, and beliefs; and the fact that their children feel safe and comfortable. For these parents, unfamiliar with the Canadian education system, the school springs out of their social network and contributes to the social cohesion of their community and the formation of social capital. For example, parents report that they learned about this charter school through word of mouth in their community, through the local Arabic newspaper, and through the Iraqi Council. The strong connection between school and the Islamic community also has its downside. The school is subject to the repercussions of conflict among community members and community leaders who also serve on the governing board of the school. The authority of the non-Arabic-speaking teachers can be undermined by parents who are influential in the community and feel they have the authority to intrude into the everyday life of the classroom. Some parents speak only Arabic to their children and to the other Arabic-speaking teachers at the school, even in the presence of non-Arabic-speaking students and faculty. Ironically, in a school created to be inclusive of ethnic minorities, the non-Arabic-speaking teachers and students report feeling that they are marginalized in the school and have difficulty maintaining respect from Arab students and their parents and integrating into the school community.

Critics of charter schools caution against the creation of these "value communities" because they reflect "little fiefdoms catering to the interests of their own social, ethnic, or cultural group, without concern for the larger social good" and contributing to the further social fragmentation of society (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996, p. 1). Communities and the social networks inherent in them tend to be closed. They can exclude those who do not adhere to the values of the network, and the networks can become a means of enforcing rigid codes of behavior. As a result, parents and students who do not "fit the mold" may be covertly excluded from a charter school. Marshall and Peters (1990) support this perspective and share in the skepticism that self-interest, exercised through school choice, can develop a sense of communal or group interest to allow

benefit to accrue (p. 151). Giroux (1992) adds that school choice appeals to those who value competitiveness, individualism, and achievement and undermines the responsibility of public service, ruptures the relationship between schools and the local community, and diverts education away from the responsibility of improving education for all students (p. 6).

Conclusion

Charter schools purport to hold much promise for school improvement as a result of greater freedom from the bureaucratic structure of mainstream public education and greater accountability. In Alberta charter schools have provoked local school boards to provide more programs of choice for students and parents, and in some instances to meet the niche population served by the charter school. However, the lack of start-up funding, capital grants, and technical support for charter schools renders them niche schools, weakening the probability that they will become a viable alternative in public education. Charter schools have been successful in providing parents with a limited range of choice in schools and more direct involvement in the governance of the education of their children, but they are much less potent forces for innovation.

Charter schools reflect new relationships between parents and the school, and the redefinition of the role of the state in the governance and administration of public education. It is evident that the process of government retrenchment from both education and health care has increased considerably the familial responsibilities for many parents who are left struggling with these matters in an atomized, individual manner. Parents struggling to balance paid work with increased family responsibilities are less able to exercise choice in the selection of alternative schools and to contribute the volunteer time required to govern and maintain charter schools.

A kind of nostalgia surrounding the charter school movement in Alberta is reflected in parents' search for an educational identity and school community where their children are happy, safe, and academically challenged. Goldring and Smrekar (1997) in their study of parental involvement in magnet schools found that parents who are active choosers view themselves as separate and distinct from other public school parents because their choice represents a significant break from the complacency and compromise experienced in their neighborhood schools. The Alberta Provincial Charter School Association, composed of representatives from charter school boards around the province, reflects this defining characteristic of charter school supporters—they are united in actively choosing to step out of the traditional public education system. A mythology of specialness surrounds each charter school community that teachers, students, and parents draw on to derive their identity and meaning and to build a culture of sentiments, tradition, and practices. In some charter schools this is reinforced through school uniforms. The sense of community and strong parental commitment to their children's school are some of the positive outcomes of charter schools.

Public education in Canada is already highly differentiated because of the communities it serves and legislation that permits public funding to Catholic, French-language, and private schools. In a pluralistic society the ideal of a common comprehensive school that can address the diverse needs and values of all children is no longer feasible. Schools are more than places to learn core

subject material: they are also social and political spaces where children are socialized into dominant culture. In our current society, Holmes (1992) argues, people want to decide for themselves the kinds of subcommunity they wish to live in, if indeed they wish to live in a community at all. Individual choice is a hallmark of postmodern society, and in this society market mechanisms appear to be the government's preferred solution to address problems related to diversity, efficiency, and accountability in the public sector.

There is a clear need for educators and policy-makers to engage the public in debates regarding the appropriate goals of schooling, the role and purpose of schooling in society, and, most important, a vision of the good society and the role citizens play in the creation and maintenance of such a society. This debate is too important to be resolved through market forces and individual choice. The state has a responsibility to create policies to target opportunities and resources toward meeting the needs of those children who have the least; to ensure that conditions of universal access, equality of opportunity, and diversity are addressed; and that the good society is realized. Canadian-based research is also required to inform this national debate with data on what works and under what conditions the most dynamic educational reform strategies can succeed.

Notes

1. Putnam (1995) uses the term *civil society* to refer to the network of cultural, social, and political associations outside of and distinct from the state. A vibrant civil society characterized by a dense web of horizontally organized associations forms the basis for a stable and flourishing democracy.
2. This information was collected during a focus group interview with parents in spring 1998.
3. Education in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction; therefore, there is no national department of education, only provincial ministries of education.
4. These figures were supplied by the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges in Alberta (AISCA) and include some ECS students (www.kingsu.ab.ca/~aisca/).
5. Information supplied by AISCA (www.kingsu.ab.ca/~aisca/).
6. *Special interest group* is a term used to describe the various needs, values, and interests that unite individuals who create and sustain a particular charter school.

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